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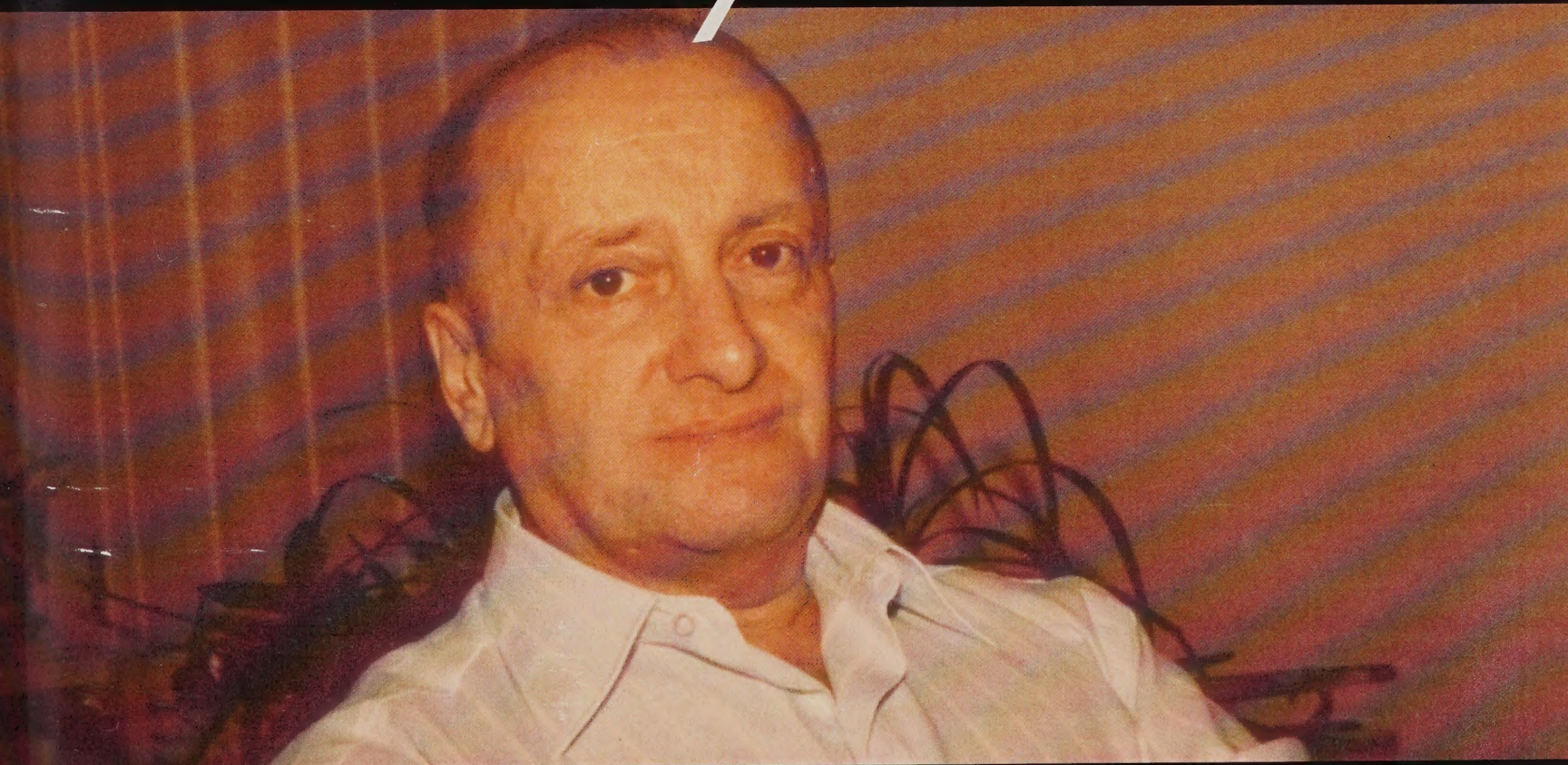
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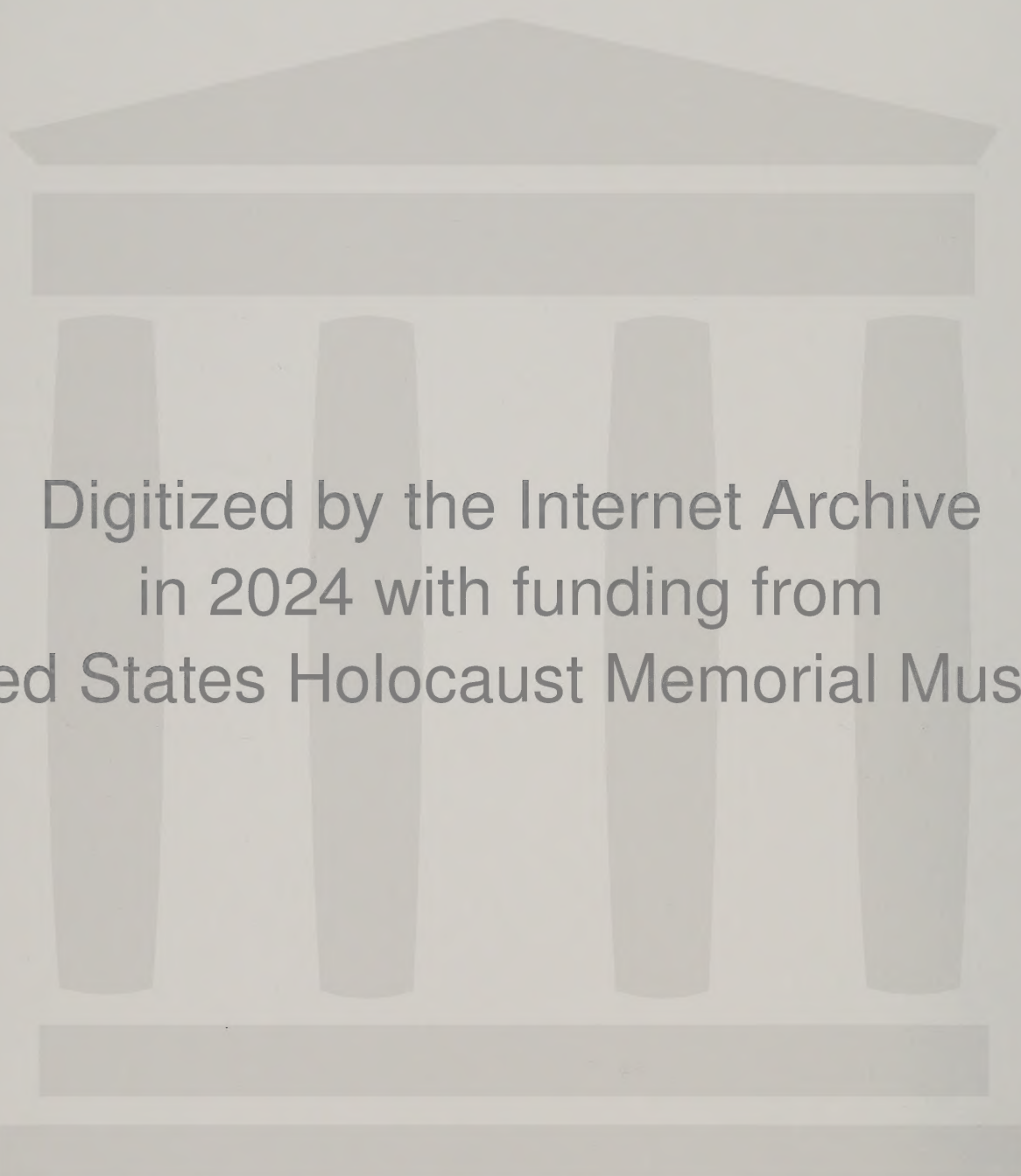
WAR & *Hope*

Ludwig Matyas



ESCAPE and RESCUE, a memoir of WW II.

The travails of a conscript in a Forced Labour Battalion of the Hungarian Fascist Regime.



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War and Hope

A World War II Memoir

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*Wer seine Ahnen nicht ehrt,
ist der Zukunft nicht wert*

Who does not honour his ancestors,
does not merit a future
German proverb

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Preface

The author, while recounting his World War II experiences in a Hungarian Forced Labour Battalion, has resisted the temptation to aggrandize his tribulations in favour of a global depiction of the vicissitudes suffered by a multitude of innocent victims.

Events climax in the late summer of 1944, with the retreat of German, Hungarian and other fascist forces from the flaming Eastern European theatre to the ridges of the Carpathian Mountains.

The withdrawal of these troops, euphemistically described by the German Supreme Command of Defence Forces (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht), as a resilient abridgement of frontlines caused diffidence in the minds of the populace within their shrinking domain. The unexpected surge of the powerful Red Army to the very borders of the Reich lifted hypnotic nebulae from the communal awareness of the master race (Herrenrasse).

The protagonists of this novel, pariahs of Nazi society, traversed incognito across Germany to the Baltic Sea and bypassed, unscathed, Auschwitz and other extermination camps.

At the end of 1944, thanks to fortuitous turns of events, perseverance and gumption, the author and a group of slave labourers succeeded in returning to Hungary. They witnessed the fight for and helped in the liberation of Budapest.

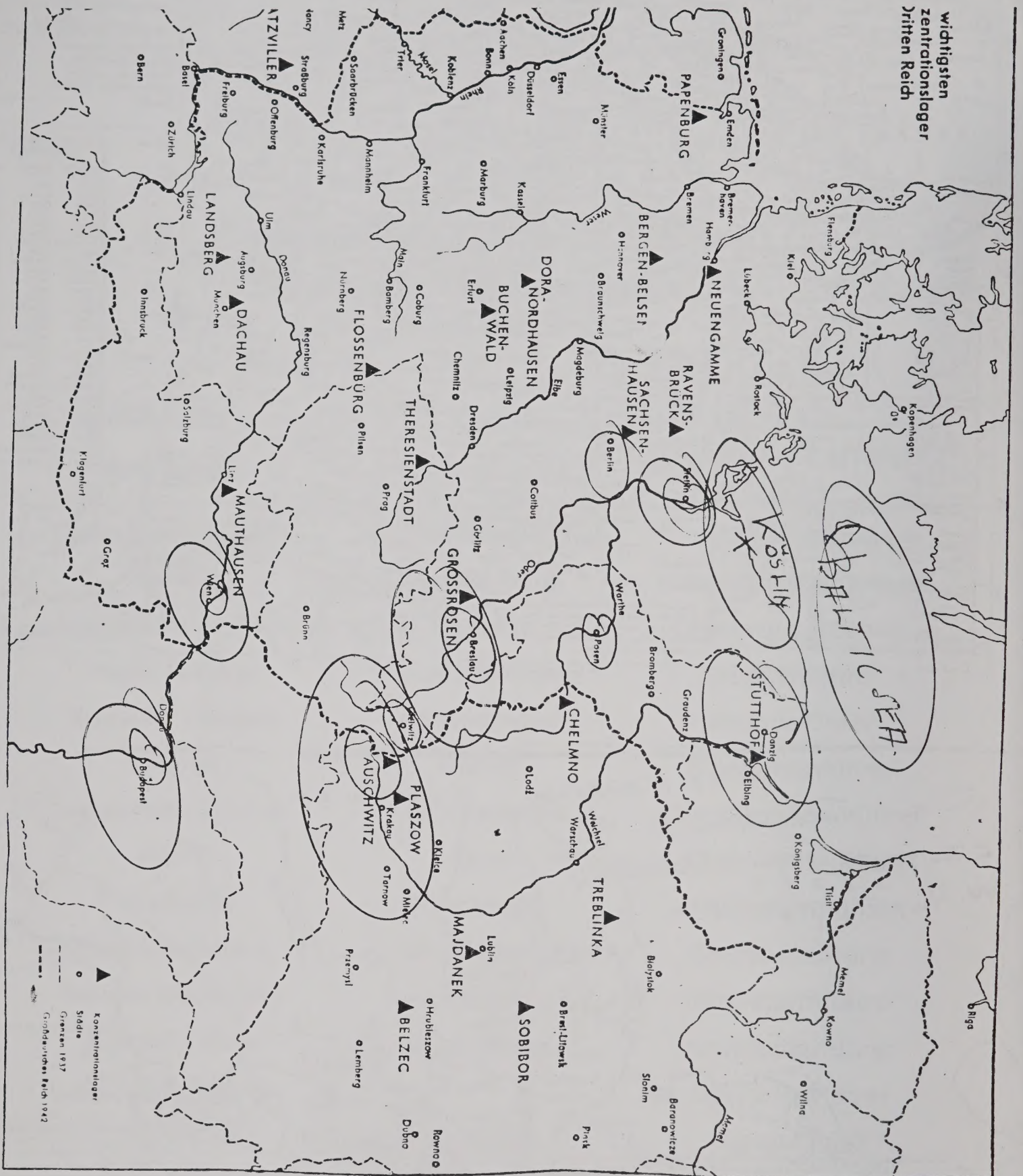
The underlying theme of this work is to document the universal striving of man for peace and brotherhood, notwithstanding tragically aberrant passages in time, caused by the demagoguery and sophistry of tyrannical regimes.

Comparative Roster of US and German Military Ranks

Word War II

US Army	Wehrmacht	Schutz Staffeln (SS)
General of the Army	Generalfeldmarschall	SS Reichsführer
General	Generaloberst	Oberstgruppenführer
Lieutenant General	General	Obergruppenführer
Major General	Generalleutnant	Gruppenführer
Brigadier General	Generalmajor	Brigadeführer
Colonel	Oberst	Standartenführer
Lieutenant Colonel	Oberstleutnant	Obersturmbannführer
Major	Major	Sturmbannführer
Captain	Hauptmann	Hauptsturmführer
First Lieutenant	Oberleutnant	Obersturmführer
Second Lieutenant	Leutnant	Untersturmführer
Warrant Officer	Unteroffizier	Hauptscharführer
Master Sergeant		Oberscharführer
Corporal	Gefreiter	Rottenführer

wichtigsten
konzentrationslager
Dritten Reich



Book One

One

Two hundred fifty Jewish conscripts of a Hungarian Forced Labour battalion were dispersed alongside a narrow, rock-strewn galician mountain pass, engaged in clearing and grading a tractable supply route for the arrogant axis troops.

On this afternoon, raw, whipping gusts swept in from the Western Ukraine, chasing low flying, dirty greyish clouds toward the dense forests of the Carpathian ridges. A swirling cumulus curtain surrounding the peaks menacingly advanced earthwards and obliterated the splotchiness of the sunshine on this September day of 1944. A thick fog rising from the parched soil plunged the jagged mountain scape into a murky, half-obscure haze. The repetitive sounds of thunderclaps, not unlike a cannonade, echoed through the valley followed by incessant lightning, casting an eerie glow upon the forested scenery. This celestial spectacle changed to an hourlong downpour of torrential intensity, transforming *terra firma* into a swamp.

Scampering onto the slopes, we searched in vain for shelter. Soaked through and through by clammy mud, and feeling much like slimy tadpoles stuck in a moor of quicksand, we plastered our tattered clothing onto tree limbs for drying. The guards interrupted this intermezzo with the aid of their rifle butts, and prodded us back onto the trails to resume the ponderous road clearing chores. Lance corporal Attila, one of our illiterate guards, hollered in a strident voice, "Filthy Jews, toss the logs and roll the rocks off the tracks." Realizing that protestations as to the degree of our cleanliness would not change his opinion, we decided to set to work.

Attila, like many other members of the slave guard *soldateska* were army rejects selected for their lack of intelligence and abundance of sadism. Some of them, living in their isolated Transylvanian mountain villages, were descendants of feudal serfs. Their former overlords, intent on having a steady supply of free labour, encouraged their underlings to propagate, if need be, incestuously. The traits of this activity was unmistakably evident in the physical appearance of our Attila. He did look different. Puny of stature with an elongated upper body. He was bowlegged, with tiny arms and feet and flaming red hair crowning a watermelon-shaped head. He could have been a frenzied escapee from a panopticum (house of weirds).

Wearing a lance corporal's uniform, he felt big and strong. A proud owner of a rifle which, slung over his back, grated his buttocks in a pendulous fashion. He could not refrain from strutting and sounding off, "You Jews should be happy that we let you work. Our heroic troops will push back the Mongols, uh, the Russian Mongols, and then, and then you won't see any Mongols." And, for further emphasis he added, "You'll be sorry, you'll be sorry!"

We did not quite follow his argument why 'not seeing any Mongols' should make us feel sorry. These Mongols were constantly described by our propaganda machine as wild and ferocious murderers. Could anything good be in store for us regarding these murderers? We did not ask Attila for a well-reasoned explanation. On the other hand, we pricked up our ears at his haltingly delivered tirade and unfamiliar vocabulary. His superiors must have hammered these words into his brains. One could easily notice that the meaning of his words were beyond his comprehension. As a regular occurrence, his sentences left us puzzled, especially when Attila, with

mouth-agape and pricked by curiosity, demanded from us, a slow explanation of his utterances.

Now, clambering onto a three-foot-high tree trunk and standing from a height of seven feet, six inches, thus towering above us, he commenced one of his familiar exhortations. "You, you sons of whores and monkeys. Work, work and don't loaf." Pausing to collect his thoughts, he took a deep breath and added, "You are not here to look at the nice landscape. You are here to help us, help us, the noble Aryans." Looking at us intently and rubbing his forehead vigorously for enlightenment, he came up with another profound monologue. "Just think, and think hard, how good we are to you. Once a day we give you hot soup just to make you strong. This soup is full of grass and leaves. The animals in the forest are also eating that. And look, but really look how strong and tough they are, the wolves, the bears and the rabbits. They run fast and they are tough. They can live in the forest, naked, all year around." He seemed exhausted from the strain of this lengthy talk. Although he was quite happy with his oral delivery, he thought that he had to add something slowly, so that we might better understand. "Nobody makes this kind of soup for the animals, they don't know how to cook. They must eat the good, green, stuff raw and they don't complain. You'll see, our good soup will make you like the animals."

His brothers-in-arms, the other privates, looked at him with admiration for having given such a well-reasoned speech. Attila, now having taken note of his heightened prestige, felt the need to add more wise words to his monologue. "You stinking Jews, we'd rather give the soup to the animals, for they never whine and argue with us. But, we are good to you, so be happy, and at least work, work and work."

He had finally run out of ideas. We concluded to be better off by not paying too much heed to his ramblings and occupy ourselves with the work at hand. Thus, we could keep our mounting frustrations in check from being bossed around by such a moron. Attila continued to watch us through his small, pig-like eyes and with a constant smirk on his pudgy face, he walked our lines, looking for something to scream about. We dug our spades into heavy, wet clayish soil and projected it toward the embankments. This chore had to be performed in a particular fashion. First, one had to dip the shovel into a watery clump of turf and while wiggling the load free off the blade, we had to toss the precious cargo toward the sides of the road.

One of our comrades, Fekete, forgetting this trick, heaved and tossed his spade, together with its heap of muck, into the furrows. Attila, observing this, blew his whistle immediately and ordered a halt to all work. Turning to Fekete, his face assuming the colour of a ripe pumpkin screamed, "Hey you, you there, you dog, what do you think you are doing by throwing away a valuable Hungarian army shovel?" Since Fekete did not give an explanation, Attila continued lambasting this unfortunate conscript, while adding a touch of irony to his queries. "Do you want to tell me that you are innocent? That you couldn't stop the shovel from flying away because it got tired of working?" Fekete could not admit his guilt, nor blame the shovel for the autonomous action. Sullenly, he waited for the impending retribution. Attila, being in charge of our platoon of fifty conscripts, instructed his mentally less endowed subordinates, to watch our reaction to his further pillorying.

"You, you all there, listen to me carefully. I want to see if all other spades grew tired of working and could fly away on their own." And now came his trump reasoning, "If they fly, then you Jews will fly after them, you can't let your spades

take off.” And now, came his final *ukase*, “If the spades can’t fly, then your monkey-brother was sabotaging the war effort.” His select choice of words came from their military indoctrination sessions.

A shrill command followed, “All you dogs, toss a mound of soil!” We were careful not to let the spades fly by themselves. Disappointed, he found something else with which to object. “You are splashing the muck all over our good Lord’s garden. This place no longer looks neat, it looks like shit, it looks like you.” Now, getting into the thing of it and enjoying himself more, he raised his rifle high and managed to fire into the ground. This was actually meant as a warning that he knew how to handle a rifle, and that we had better be careful. Unperturbed, we stood at attention waiting for his choice of retributions to follow.

“Everybody leapfrog into the ditch. Scrape all the muck together and form it into nice round mounds. Things should look pretty.” Some of my comrades, their emaciated bodies no longer capable of further exertions, tumbled into the muck. Attila, believing that these slave labourers were intentionally evading his orders, screeched out another order. “All you Jews, hurry up with those nice, fat mud mounds because you’ll also have other things to do.” Slowly, we moved into the ditches and started forming nice mud-balls. As soon as we had finished our landscaping work, Attila, with a big grin on his ugly face, commanded, “Now, you will roll around in the ditches until all the shit sticks to you. I know you Jews, you like to roll around in the shit. You are worse than pigs because you are not Aryans.” Seeing our furore, he tried to placate us by saying, “I want a clean place. Work has to be done neatly.”

Attila, not having been able to keep count of all the orders he had given, demanded to hear what those orders were. We told him that he wanted us to work neatly. Satisfied with this answer, he now wanted to know why we were rolling around in the muck. There was no point in explaining any of this to him, apparently it would not have made sense.

Our company commander, Ensign Kántor, while making his inspection rounds, happened to come upon this scene. Ordering Attila to his side, he demanded an immediate explanation for the strange activities of the Jewish labourers. Fuming with rage, he turned to Attila, bellowing, "If you want the ditches to look nice, to become like the Lord's garden, then you will do that all by yourself!" Attila was shattered. Not only had he been berated by the company commander, he had lost face with his men and the Jews. Kántor had the reputation of a strict disciplinarian with a pronounced sense for fairness. Yet, he had to show that his concern for the Jews was not for humanitarian reasons. "The Jews are here to contribute to our war efforts. They are here to work until they drop dead from exhaustion. Any punishment which does not help our goals, will have to be stopped." With these words, he winked at us and with obvious satisfaction, regarded Attila busying himself in the ditches, while we clambered up the slopes and tried to cleanse ourselves from the muck.

Ensign Kántor was not your average type of officer commanding a Jewish forced labour company. Small of stature and in his early forties, he was rigidly militaristic in his comportment. Kántor was a former school teacher from Transylvania (Erdély) who, lovelorn, left his native village to join the French Foreign Legion. There he attained the rank of sergeant. As the battalion's only officer who showed some compassion for us, his outwardly stern demeanour was a subterfuge of a worldly

and understanding personality. His high-pitched, shrill commands conveyed the impression of a shrieking hyena, chasing its prey in the desert. He had seen service in the French Sahara and Algiers and had participated in raids, putting down Bedouin and Berber rebellions. His legion companions were not only from the dregs of society, nay, they were the scions of aristocrats and disposed politicians, all seeking relative anonymity and security within the ranks of this army, where few questions were asked.

Kántor had learnt to appreciate the qualities of human beings, regardless of their social, racial or religious backgrounds. He judged people for what they were, and how they acted under fire. In our eyes, he had assumed the role of a father figure. Yet, he was obliged to maintain a Jew-baiting, hateful attitude to camouflage his humane feelings. In this context, his severe order 'to make us work until they drop,' took on a completely different appearance. It meant that he would see to it 'that we would always work' while under his command.

Sullenly, we continued with our road work. We did not want to give the guards the satisfaction of noticing our discomfort. Yet, there were mumbled demands in our ranks to rub out Attila at the earliest opportunity. At the present, we were looking forward to our invigorating chaff soup.

On this day, thanks to Attila, we had learnt a few things: a) History: the Russians were bestial Mongols; b) Physics: the law of the self-propelled spade; c) Logic: that negated point b), therefore equalling sabotage and; d) Anthropology: dirt was equated with race.

Two

Simárdi was one of the slave labourers, (euphemistically called a public works servant) assigned to my platoon. At dawn on this murky day in September 1944, shivering and with pangs of hunger, he crawled out from the hollow in the mountainside he had dug earlier with his bare hands. He was dressed in a torn tennis garb and wearing tennis shoes whose detached soles were secured with cotton strings. Utter darkness clouded the dense forest and neither sound nor glimmer of light denoted the presence of our fatigued labour company.

Wearily, he leaned against an odorous spruce tree, momentarily inhaling its refreshing scent and feeling revitalized and comforted. It brought back memories of his high school days and summer excursions to their cottage in the Mátra mountains. Now, in the obscurity of these surroundings, his sagging spirits evoked the semiconscious image of being a participant in a nightmare. He forced his mind to pierce the lethargy of his thoughts and gain realistic awareness of his dreary situation. Yet, his mind unremittingly wandered back to the reassuring past. He recalled history lessons of his high school days and of the Sumerians, who believed in the ultimate transmigration of the human body and soul into animal shapes. A slight grin played around his mouth at the facetious thought of wishing to become a groundhog. He had not yet passed the first test of becoming one by seeking shelter and burrowing into the ground with his fingers or claws. The all encompassing urges to be free of the present environment made the acceptance of this metamorphosis less than ludicrous. He was in a state of morbid depression, while realizing that he could not fully trust his objectivity.

Again and again he culled his brains for a satisfying answer to the lingering self-reproach for being a slave labourer. He should have anticipated that being of half gentile descent would not exempt him from physical abuse by the sadistic guards. He ought to have dodged the draft, or at least deserted his unit a long time ago.

Malnutrition had reduced his weight to one hundred ten pounds. At the age of twenty-one, he felt like a tottering dotard and his will for self-preservation seemed to be sapped. The chances of escape were, at best, marginal. Yet, a faint inner voice prodded him on to run away and aimlessly roam the woods, then gradually sink into oblivion. A sudden surge of resolve spurred him on to attempt, to at least go AWOL. The consequences of failure became irrelevant. He looked around furtively, everything seemed tranquil and no sound indicated anyone was awake. A slight breeze rustled amongst the conifers and the slopes were coated by the early frost of the dawn.

Cautiously, he moved toward the hillside crest. The wind picked up and in its wake, deposited swirling snow onto the ground. Sleet and ice pellets slashed against his emaciated body. He had already advanced about one hundred metres, and was excited and elated, now brimming with hope at not having been detected. In the opaqueness of the night, he picked his way carefully, avoiding the prostrate bodies of his buddies. Another hundred metres to go and he would be beyond the perimeters of the encampment. Once apprehended outside the demarcation lines, he would be considered a deserter. He was fully aware of the consequences this classification would provoke. Although these actions might bring about an unceremonious execution, he shirked off the thought and trudged on forward.

Worries of finding sustenance on the hilltops of barren elevations crossed his mind only fleetingly. He knew of some withered blueberry bushes, to which roaming bears were privy. Also, around the onset of Winter, famished wolf packs having shed their fear of humans, would approach habitations, pillaging for edibles. The possibility of crossing the paths of these beasts did not diminish his resolve. He stumbled toward a clearing in the dense bushes, all the while straining his eyes to avoid guards on duty. None were visible. He was perplexed by the complete absence of the twenty-five armed personnel. Cautiously, he slid down a small escarpment, which was covered by broken boughs and scaly fir twigs, forming a small knoll. Freedom beckoned.

He lost his balance trying to untangle his feet from twine and fell heavily to the ground. The ground then gave way and he tumbled into a dugout. He landed on top of a jerking body, whose flailing arms and legs tried to ward off this nocturnal apparition. He had landed on top of Vasas, the gypsy guard. Vasas, unceremoniously awakened from his deep slumber of the righteous, searched frenetically for his revolver. In his superstitious mind, he imagined the intruder to be an avenging ghost. In a shaking voice, he cried out, "Who are you, or, what are you?" Gathering his courage, for there was no reply, he threatened, "You, you just wait until I find my revolver, then we'll talk." For good measure, he added a few choice words spoken in his Romany tongue which normally he would refrain from using, not to remind others of his ancestry.

Simárdi, groaning with pain, and disillusioned that he had fallen into Vasas' lair, kept on stammering, "I'm sorry, I'm really sorry." Vasas, regaining his courage by realizing that no avenging ghost would profess to be sorry for anything, continued to mumble on in Romany. Finally, after having found his composure, he demanded in

a shaky voice that his intruder identify himself. Simárdi, trying to gain time, searched for an appropriate answer to alleviate his precarious situation. Thus, he responded, "I don't understand the gypsy language." This proved to be the wrong choice of words, for it incensed Vasas even more.

Attempting to cover up his blunder in having muttered in Romany, he shouted at Simárdi, "So it is one of you Jewish mongrels! Nobody else would keep on saying, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry.'" And for more clarity, he added, "You will see, you will see you bastard dog, how sorry I'll make you." Now the words came spouting forth, in Hungarian, "You dirty son of a cur. You want to make fun of me? You know that I am a gallant Hungarian, and Hungarians don't speak the gypsy language." In Hungarian parlance, noncommissioned conscripts were sometimes addressed as Mr Gallant.

Simárdi tried to pacify Vasas by declaring, "Mr Instructor," all guards below military rank had to be formally addressed as such, "I see that you do not understand the gypsy language. I made a mistake." And to make amendments, he added, "You only spoke in a language which you don't understand." This explanation, however ambiguous it may have sounded, seemed to make sense to Mr Instructor. Vasas was yet to be silenced. Having recovered from his initial shock, he kicked his uninvited guest to the parapet, demanding to know the reason for his visit. "You stinking mongrel, what has come over you to be wandering about and dropping in on me like that? Have you perhaps fallen in love with me?"

Simárdi, denying all intentions of sexual aspirations, could not mollify his indignant superior. The more Simárdi emphasized that Mr Instructor did not appeal to him as a sexual partner, the more Vasas became riled, sensing in these assurances a

derogation of his masculinity. It indeed became difficult for Simárdi to come up with an acceptable explanation. Vasas, on the other hand, seeing that Simárdi had painted him into a corner, became more wordy. "Do you think that you can roam about here as you have done in Budapest visiting all the night spots?" Simárdi could only counter with a feeble, "No." This simple answer to his questions did not satisfy Vasas. He continued with his interrogations, "Tell me now, you dog, or I'll shoot you dead, and I mean right away, what were you looking for? A bordello, perhaps?" The thought of this seemed to amuse Vasas, as he continued, "Ha, ha, ho, no, no and no! Even there, nobody would want to have sex with you, because you are ugly. You are an ugly mongrel!"

Simárdi endured Mr Instructor's hilarity with silence, meanwhile musing how to dispel any notion of sexual intentions, or even worse to avoid being accused of desertion. A growling of his intestines led him to the flash idea to express to Vasas that he was suffering from diarrhea and was only searching for a quiet spot to relieve himself. Unfortunately for Simárdi, this explanation did not sit well with Mr Instructor. Relieving oneself directly above the head of his superior seemed to reek of a personal vendetta. A predawn fecal attack, while he was still fast asleep, seemed to Vasas, as an intolerable physical assault against his dignity.

Vasas finally decided how to go about punishing Simárdi. Pressing his handgun against his intruder's posterior, he jostled Simárdi toward a sturdy tree. There he lashed his victim's raised hands to some knotty branches and demanded in a sneering voice, "Now lover-boy, relieve yourself every ten minutes with your diarrhea, this shouldn't be too difficult." And in a menacing tone, he added, "If you won't, then I'll make you." Simárdi felt distressed, yet strangely comforted in the knowledge that dysentery, providing him with prowess of his bowels, would

corroborate his innocence.

At reveille, and after roll call, standing in rigid formations, we were informed by commanding officer Kántor of last night's incidents and were sternly warned against trying to imitate Simárdi's exploits. As for Simárdi, he earnestly promised, in the future, to be more selective of the spots he chose for his nightly personal needs. Vasas, Mr Instructor on the other hand, could no longer look at Simárdi without gnawing suspicions of the latter latent intentions.

Simárdi had abandoned the idea of running away. He could no longer muster sufficient energy to contemplate such an undertaking. His daytime activities were performed in a trance-like state of somnolence. His body and mind ached for sleep. He had enlarged his hollowed-out shelter providing a supine nighttime accommodation. A borrowed pick axe enabled him to remove the embedded rocks and undergrowth. Following this chore, he spread soft soil onto the terrain of his quarters. A small, smooth flagstone-like boulder would serve as a pillow elevation.

Around eight o'clock that evening, a heavy snowfall blew over the encampment and covered the bodies of the repose-seeking slave labourers (KMSZ, Közmunkaszolgálatos). The temperature had dropped radically. Seeking some kind of reprieve from the ever increasing snowdrifts, the KMSZ crawled underneath waist-high bushes and covered the exposed cavities with branches of conic, tapered fir and spruce branches. This makeshift arrangement provided them with little solace, as howling winds accompanied a now blinding snowstorm.

We spent the entire night under these conditions, our bodies shivering and teeth clattering from the cold. Turning from one fatigued position to another only

aggravated our torpid limbs, as the movement caused our roof of twigs to collapse. A new effort had to be made to assemble the conifer branches in a symmetrical pattern in order to huddle underneath. Many amongst us contracted rheumatic fever and concretions of the joints. We were not allowed to light any fires in order to avoid becoming targets for reconnoitring Russian Rata planes.

The banter of the guards could be heard from their kerosene-lit log cabins. They were snugly comfortable and could not have cared less about our predicament. Slave labourers, frozen to death, could always be replaced from the hinterland.

The air was icy. The scent of pungent conifers and mouldiness of moss and rotting radicles transpired within Simárdi's poorly insulated den. The wind howled outside. Inside his shelter, he curled up in a fetal position seeking the warmth of his own body. He tried desperately to ignore his predicament and sought solace in recalling past events.

His childhood and adolescence were spent in a luxurious apartment, more akin to a mansion, with separate quarters for servants. Located in the most prestigious section of Pest, their house was a gathering hub for the middle ranked aristocracy, and the shakers and movers of Hungary's industrial and political elite. The popularity of their residence was well deserved. His father was a director general of Hungary's second largest railway station, and was well connected to the Ministries of the Interior and Transportation. He was a gracious host, surpassed only by his charming wife who had a facility of making everyone feel at home.

Summer months were spent at their rose garden and villa, high on the Rózsadomb

(hill of roses), in Buda¹, overlooking the sprawling expanse of the Danube, and the landmarks of Pest. The most striking feature was the panoramic view of the parliament building, patterned after the mother of all parliaments in London. Frequent trips were made to the Sea of the Hungarians, Lake Balaton, the Dalmation coastline, and the Alto Adige region of Italy's South Tyrol.

His father, a Catholic by birth, had fallen in love with his mother, a Jewish girl. Together, they overcame the prejudices and misgivings of their families to finally obtain consent to their union. It became a successful marriage, both partners compromising on occasions to foster a stronger and more tolerant environment for their only son, named Laci, or László, after Ladislás, a Hungarian king. Laci's father was convinced that his position and connections at the highest seat of power would exempt his family from the ever increasing anti-Semitic influences emanating from the Third Reich. Subsequent events proved him wrong.

Political life in Hungary became quite turbulent. The nationalistic and chauvinistic elements managed to create an aggressive political stance by demanding the cancellation of the humiliating terms of the Treaty of Trianon. They clamoured for the return of all ceded territories given to the neighbouring democracies, such as Yugoslavia, Rumania and Czechoslovakia. Internally, the activities of the political opposition was curtailed and finally suppressed. The persecution of the Jews took on a virulent form.

Hungary, in order to achieve their territorial claims against their neighbours had to

¹Buda - on a hilly plateau, of the twin cities, situated on the west bank of the Danube. Pest - the newer part, site of the parliament, ministries, museums and industrial sites.

align herself with fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Japan. Thus, in January 1939, she became a full partner of the so-called Anti-Comintern Pact. The political rewards meted out by the axis powers were not late in coming. Following the 1939 annexation and partition of Czechoslovakia, Hungary gained a part of Slovakia and Ruthenia. At the end of August 1940, the axis powers agreed to a partial cession of Rumanian Transylvania to Hungary. In April 1941, subsequent to the Nazi attack on Yugoslavia, Hungary ordered her troops into those territories which were originally ceded by the Treaty of Trianon to its southerly neighbour, Yugoslavia. The revanchist dream of a greater Hungary (Nagy Magyarország), seemed to be realizable, thanks to the axis powers. As an outgrowth of their territorial success, and also to prove to the axis their full alignment, steps were taken to completely stifle all internal opposition. The persecution of Jews took on a Draconian form.

Jewish business enterprises were Aryanized. This meant the outright usurpation and loss of their financial interests, or the installation of an Aryan pure blood Hungarian to run the affairs of the foreign element. The Jews were afforded a temporary, advisory role without meaningful benefits.

Aryans, according to Nazi ideas, were principally Nordic and other European gentiles. Not all Aryans were equal. Slavic Aryans were of a lower category. In anthropological terms, their allies, Japan and Hungary, by not belonging to the Indo-Persian-European subrace, were not Aryans.

On the other hand, gypsies, who are remotely descended from Indo-European ethnicity, thus of Aryan stock, were severely persecuted by the Nazis. Most of the central European gypsies were murdered. Nazis professed their Germanic Aryan superiority over all other races. Accordingly, they claimed to be guided by eugenics

in suppressing other inferior races.

The word, Aryan, is derived from Sanskrit, the ancient mother tongue of Indo-Persian-European people, meaning *the noble one, a lord*.

Another paradox in the thinking of the race purists was the clampdown in the emigration of the undesired element, the Jews. They were declared to be the enemy of the Aryans, the saboteurs of the economy, and consequently of the war effort. Nonetheless, they were not prevented from participating in these unsavoury roles by the government's incongruous determination to keep their Jews at home.

The western powers, in an apparent effort to assuage the axis countries, built a bureaucratic wall of exclusion of potential Jewish immigrants, by demanding a prior exit visa which was not obtainable before issuing their own entry permits. Such documents, with the Munich treaty style collusion of the democratic states, were not issued. The destruction of the majority of European Jewry was thus set in motion.

Laci graduated from a well-known Budapest Realgymnasium, a high school of humanistic orientation with *summa cum laude*. At universities, a *numerus clausus*, in other words, a disbarment of Jews, or persons of partial to read fractional Jewish ancestry, prevailed. In consequence, it became unachievable for Laci to enter the engineering faculty.

His father's position as a highly placed public official was under attack and became the target of jealous aspirants who launched a whisper campaign against the dubious patriotic loyalty of a man with a Jewish spouse. Laci found work as a junior railway clerk. He surrounded himself with an air of anonymity, intent on not

revealing the identity of his father. So as not to cause additional problems under the existing political climate, he had moved out from his parental home.

He lived in a poorly furnished garret abode. His former carefree life of garden parties with rollicking gypsy music and the occasional bar-hopping activity became faded memories of a lost youth. His sheltered lifestyle and happy home life were gone. He felt stigmatized, for his mother was Jewish.

In June 1941, Hungary, allied with Nazi Germany, declared war on the Soviet Union. The reason given for joining the axis powers' aggression was an alleged unprovoked attack by Russian bomber planes against the town of Kassa (Košice). This city of approximately 140,000 is situated at a mere eighty miles northwest of Budapest.

The residents of Kassa, and other Hungarians had come to a much different interpretation of this occurrence. The Hungarian government, with the foreknowledge of Nazi Germany, needed a pretext to participate militarily against the Soviet Union. Thus, a scenario was created by which Hungarian planes flying the Soviet insignia attacked their own city. A proud and righteous Hungary had to respond to such a Bolshevist misdeed and promptly set their war machine in motion. The purported Soviet bombardment of Kassa would have been an unbelievable fiat which lacked a logical *raison d'être*. Russian air bases were, at that time, located too far to allow for an aerial assault. Furthermore, if it had been logistically feasible, which it was not, they would have chosen the Hungarian capital city of Budapest. And the most telling point to discredit the sham attack was that Russia had enough problems on hand coping with Nazi Germany, not to bolster the latter by providing them with an additional military ally.

The Hungarian government, together with a strong anti-Communist and irredentist movement, promised them to reap huge territorial benefits through their war participation. They were convinced that finally the dream of a Great Hungary could be realized. Land, where Hungarian minorities had lived for centuries, would be returned to the Motherland. This meant the annexation of areas, which belonged to Slovakia, Poland, Rumania and Yugoslavia. Furthermore, an outlet to the Adriatic Sea at Fiume beckoned.

One of the most portentous social political ideas adopted from Nazi Germany was the implementation of the heinous Nürnberg Laws. In accordance with these laws, people with even the remotest traceable Jewish lineage became *personae non gratae*. Thus, they were deprived of their civil rights and liberties. Sexual contact with Aryans was deemed to be an act of race violation (Rassenschande), which was punishable by incarceration, torture or the death sentence.

Laci sardonically recalled the vain attempts of his father to have him smuggled into Yugoslavia. The German occupation of this former haven for refuge put an end to such endeavours. Pressure was brought upon his father to divest himself of his racially unsuitable wife. The stubborn refusal to comply with this demand ensued in a retaliatory dismissal of his father from the important position he had occupied for many years.

It was at the end of September 1942 that young Simárdi received his call up papers to report within forty-eight hours to a Jewish forced labour battalion. The urgent document superimposed by the picture of an eagle, which symbolized its importunity, denoted the place of assemblage and the number of his paramilitary unit. The location was shown as Bereck, a small hamlet in the most easterly region

of the Transylvanian Alps, called Háromszékmegye (Three-Seats county). His unit was the Second Company of Battalion Thirteen - XIII/2. He was further advised to report with a white armband sewn to the left sleeve of his jacket. This was to signify his identity for being of mixed Jewish ancestry.

His mother filled his knapsack with home cookings; honey, bacon, ham condensed milk and biscuits. His wooden army trunk contained warm winter clothing, boots and blankets. His father handed him the family bible convinced that the daily reading of the scriptures, psalms and verses would help his son to spiritually surmount all adversities. Their faith in the Holy Trinity and the strength of a traditional Catholic upbringing remained unshakeable.

At the railroad station, whose overseer he had been for many years, his father, a reserve army colonel of Word War I, proudly wearing his dress uniform, bedecked with old battle decorations, bid his son a fond farewell. His parents were the only people to see him off. No former family friends would jeopardize their reputation by mingling with them. The elder Simárdi, while hugging his son's shoulders, kept on repeating the importance of believing in our Lord Jesus Christ and His teachings. Torn between love and respect for his father, young Simárdi could not shrug off the feeling of disbelief or readily accept the paradox of being drafted into the dreaded KMSZ. Turning toward his mother, he searched to find an awareness in her eyes of his anguish and turmoil of soul.

Haltingly, while leaning against her husband, his mother with searing intensity in her voice addressed her son, "Look Laci, don't despair, this lunacy can't last for long. In a few months the war will be over and we will once again be united as a family as in the olden days." She tried to speak persuasively, which effort to convince, while

overcome by fear for her only son, she hardly managed. Her son knew only too well that his mother was trying to convince herself of the veracity of her own words. "I know mother that you want to make me feel strong, but isn't it an injustice for me to be sent to this confounded forced labour camp which is run by the scum of our country?" And, as an afterthought, he added, "If there is war, then I want to fight with a gun in my hands, like any other Hungarian." After a pause, which his parents puzzled over his naive patriotism, he continued, "How can they discriminate against me because you mother, are Jewish? I am just as good a Hungarian as the best." His mother's eyes reddened with tears, she was torn between fervent love for her son, and helpless agony and self-reproach for being the cause of her son's distress. Lack of logic and race hatred fomented by a ruthless society had engulfed her thinking as well.

It was her husband, sensing his wife's torments and self-accusations who turning to her proclaimed soothingly, "Look dear, whatever is hurting you is hurting me. We are one family. Our bonds cannot be destroyed by this filthy fascist clique." And seeing the calming effects his words had on her, he declared emphatically, "You have no reason to reproach yourself." His wife looked at her husband tenderly as he continued, "My family, we were always valiant defenders of our land, and there is no doubt in my heart that our son, Laci, could be just as good a soldier as I have been." Both his wife and son listened with renewed pride and self-assurance to these words. Embracing both his wife and son, the elder Simárdi declared with conviction, "This devilish regime will perish for having divided the nation and raised their bloody hands against a valuable and loyal part of our people."

Now, turning to his son and assuming a somewhat rigid, military posture, he declared, "Look son, you know of the low esteem I hold for these fascist gangsters.

But we Simárdis never give in. Show them your disdain and contempt by being firm, never ask for mercy and never cringe. This way you'll prove them wrong and keep yourself strong."

Laci knew that his father only wanted to bolster his spirits. Yet, he must have known that it was easier to pronounce bold phrases than to carry them out. Nevertheless, he thanked his father for his encouraging words, fully aware that it was just as hard for his father as for himself to express such sustaining ideas, which would not lose their effectiveness, once uttered.

Seeing his son not responding, the older Simárdi felt that he had to make his opinions known once more. "As much as I would like my country to be victorious, never could I cherish such glory knowing that good Hungarians, like you son, had to serve in slave labour camps."

With these words, the elder Simárdi had exhausted the self-enforced plethora of encouragements. He could no longer simply indulge in expressing lofty ideas or opinions, and felt spiritually drained for he loved his son dearly. He feared for him being put into an environment where he would not be able to fight or fight back like a soldier. He dreaded and resented the fate which would make his son a slave.

It was time to board the train. He hugged his father and mother once more, who did not want to let go of him. The train signalman's loud whistle call summoned the draftees to load their equipment onto the wagons and embark anon. One more embrace. The train started to move out slowly as if unwilling to leave the station. Laci scrambled up onto the perron of his railcar and while holding on to the railing, waved to his parents until the train turned a bend and he lost sight of them. He

could not free himself from a premonition that this would be his last farewell.

Puffing steam locomotives, belching ashes and cinder into the air, enwrapped the huge aula of the train station with the smudgy, carbonic excretions of their entrails. Well wishers and train attendants were covered by an acrid film of charcoal compounds. The large open glass cupola of the terminus vented the foul air only flaggingly. Suddenly, a detachment of gendarmes with fixed bayonets rushed onto the platforms, ushering the Jewish draftees' friends and relatives toward the exits. In the dimly lit corridors they made no distinction between men, women or children. All laggards or loiterers who did not heed their scatological expletives to make haste were encouraged by haphazardly applied smashes of rifle butts.

These gendarmes, mostly uncouth yokels, well-known for their dearth of brains, surpassed only by their lust for power and viciousness, were greatly detested by the population. One of these louts, clothed in an ochre-greenish uniform, jauntily wearing a shako, adorned with red rooster plumes, turned brusquely to Mrs Simárdi and hollered, "You Jewess, get the hell out of here! One, two, four and three!" He had forgotten the arithmetical sequence. "Back to your stinking ghetto street!" Mrs Simárdi, anguished by the gendarmes' rude behaviour and foul language, clasped her husband's protective arms.

Another of the gendarmes, a village bumpkin, perceiving this act to be an affront to the dignity of the officer had turned pumpkin red. He swallowed hard, feeling close to apoplexy and could only snarl through his clenched teeth, "You Jewish old nag, will you let go immediately of this officer's arm!" As he tried to wrench her arm free, old Simárdi pulled his sabre from its scabbard and was ready to smite the insolent gendarme. Only his wife's pleading prevented a grossly embarrassing

scene. The gendarme, feeling utterly humiliated, bellowed now at the old veteran, "Sir, I will report you immediately to my superiors, having attempted to strike a gallant officer of the peace, while protecting a Jewess." This sentence surprisingly well delivered was an apparent reminder of previous encounters with citizens, whom he had "tried to protect." Simárdi, shaking with rage and fury, his sabre still at the ready, declared vehemently, "You snivelling whelp, don't you dare lay a hand on this lady, this lady is my wife." The gendarme's mouth fell wide open, unable to respond right away to this unexpected bit of news.

Simárdi could feel all of his pent-up emotions of humiliation, shame and loss of power well-up inside of him and could no longer control himself. Turning to the offending peace officer, Simárdi hollered in an almost barking, staccato tone, "You village fool, I'll teach you a lesson you'll never forget." And turning to one of his former porters, he instructed him to fetch the station master.

The gendarme, having regained some of his composure, stammered, "The world has gone crackers, the world has gone crackers. I can't believe it, I can't believe it." And finally, he explained to himself and to anyone who cared to listen to his rambling what he could not believe. "No uniformed officer would publicly admit that he has a Jewish wife." And a sudden thought struck him like lightning. "I am right, I am right, this couldn't be, ah, no, no, and no again, no, no." And he added triumphantly, "This so-called officer is a Jew, a Jew, a raving mad Jew."

He turned for help to a platoon of gawking gendarmes and said, "This Jew and his Jewess are under arrest. Take them away!" Arriving at the scene of this imbroglio, the station-master, a lanky, bemonocled aristocrat, wearing the uniform of a major, and seeing the predicament of his old comrade, put an immediate stop to this

charade. The gendarme, defending his course of action, turned to the station master, "Mr Station Master, I do humbly report that this," and pointing at Simárdi, "Officer is not an officer. He is only dressed like an officer." And concluding his final argument, he maintained, "He is a Jew, no uniformed officer would walk around telling everyone that he has a Jewish wife."

The gendarme's 'well-founded reasoning' seemed only to enrage the major. The gendarme, snapping to rigid attention, while at the same time trying to evade the major's threatening index finger circling his nose, was subjected to a harangue, "I have had enough of your kind's constant Jew-baiting, and the nerve you idiot had calling a retired colonel 'a dressed-up Jew.'" The major was not to be calmed down. "I am, based on my authority, as military station master, placing you herewith, under arrest, your platoon is to clear the railway station immediately!" The gendarme, in being led away, kept on mumbling, "Oh good Lord Jesus, to what has the world come. A Jew is dressed like an officer and now they tell me that this Jew is a real officer!" And he kept on insisting, "I don't understand that," while looking around for somebody to explain the puzzle to him. Simárdi had a hard time propitiating his old friend, the major. The major was incensed at being the witness to a rowdy scene, created by the uncouth gendarmes. Simárdi, on the other hand, feared that this incident could be brought to the attention of a military tribunal, which possibility could have unpleasant consequences for his son.

The major, an old army comrade of Simárdi could not be calmed down. He continued to express his views in a rather loud voice, "Even the Jewish conscript labourers are doing more for our Hungary than these worthless swines, they are only bossing around the weak, they steal and plunder at any opportunity."

The other gendarmes shuffled around nervously and felt utterly relieved at being led away from the two officers who had expressed their disgust of them so volubly. The major reassured his friend that it was in his power to contain this incident and that it would not be brought before a higher military board. Simárdi thanked his friend for having stood up for him and cautioned however to not let his empathy for the ostracized endanger his career. These were not the most propitious times to publicly rally against the oppressors.

Three

The train had picked up speed. We passed by working class suburbs with the sprawling factory plants of Rákospalota and Újpest. Whitewashed trim cottage settlements surrounded small farms where unperturbed peasants were following the ancient ritual of tilling their fields. At the next railway junction, additional box cars full of peasant draftees, were linked to the train. These recruits were also on their way to the eastern frontiers to be thrown into battle against the godless, uncivilized Bolsheviks. These fellows were as a whole, a simple, naive, good-natured lot. The state's foul-mouthing against Jews had, as yet, not changed their attitudes. They ambled from one box car to the other, trying to make friends with all and sundry.

They were proud of having been accepted into the army, and were eager to fulfill their prescribed patriotic duty. They wanted to defend Hungary and to defeat Soviet Russia, the scourge of all decent mankind. These draftees moved freely without rancour or animosity amongst us slave labourers. They lacked anti-Semitic intolerance in contrast to many of their urban peers. We had something in common, we were all twenty-one year old recruits. In their conversations, they showed us a measure of respect. It was the traditional attitude of a society which was based on class distinction.

They opened their wicker baskets and passed around old fashioned smoke ham, cured paprika bacon and home baked sour dough bread, swigged down by large quantities of wine and apricot brandy. We in turn reciprocated with goose liver, breaded veal cutlets and an assortment of strudels. Thus, a good rapport was established all around.

Our two groups of merry-makers were however distinct by the insignia we wore. The soldiers-to-be haughtily displayed their cockade of the Hungarian tri-colour, red-white-green, which was sewn to their hats and jackets. They looked at us with a mixture of sorrow and condescension at the sight of our white or yellow armbands.

Martial songs, some boisterous, ribald or nostalgic were interspersed with old folklore ditties and echoed through the box cars. Close to 3,000 draftees tried to outperform each other with their vocal aptitudes. The same tunes were picked up by baritone, bass and falsetto voices, all straining at their highest pitch, until a deafening sound of a cacophony was achieved.

By nightfall, even the most ambitious vocalists had abandoned all efforts to block out memories of home and the uncertain future. The air was fetid with the perspiration of bodies which were sprawled in a pell-mell fashion across the aisles. The vomit of overindulgent tipplers was suffocating. Most of the cab windows were closed or jammed in their rusted tracks. Only two sashes could be pried open which provided a small measure of ventilation. Dense, floating tobacco fumes were intermittently pierced by two flickering oil lanterns, set in two opposite upper cornices of the wagon. By now, most of the chaps had dozed off.

A girl appeared, groping her way across the rumbling interconnecting passageway and opened the door to the compartment. Beseechingly, she looked around for a vacant seating space. In her early twenties, she was a fine looking slip of a girl, petite and dark-haired with a comforting expression on her roundish face.

The fellows, in a morose stupor just a moment ago, felt electrified and revitalized at the sight of this unexpected, more than welcome entrant. They instantly became

gallants, trying to outbid each other by offering her accommodation close to their proximity. "Come on in Miss, don't be shy, we are all decent, well-mannered guys." Then others would chime in, "Here, here, right next to me, I'll make space for you," and another one, suggesting slyly, "If it isn't large enough for you, I'll let you stretch out over me."

With such comments, they tried to persuade the little cutie to sit next to them. The little one, however was not without a sense of humour and replied in a similar vein, "Gentlemen, gentlemen, I'm really flattered by your generous offer," and with a pout of her mouth, a tilt of her head and a lilt in her voice, she added, "I've become so used to sitting on my own rear end that really I'll have to refuse to sit on anybody's lap."

As the offers of shared accommodation continued to come in, she decided that a stronger expression of refusal had to be made. Coquettishly she said, "Valiant gentlemen, I'm really honoured at such a great measure of hospitality, but I wouldn't dream of creasing your pants by sitting on your laps," and in a more serious tone she declared, "I'm in need of rest and would like to find a place next to someone who will let me relax and not bother me with his attentions." Appreciating the fact that the girl had not brushed them off brusquely, or considered them to be bores, the ambiance in the compartment again became lighthearted and jovial.

The slightly stilted expressions of civility and theatrical shows of hospitality were all indigenous to the Hungarian character. (A strong desire for respectability would, for instance, let a mendicant take a Sunday stroll dressed in his frippery, head adorned with a bowler or derby hat.) Her searching eyes fell on Simárdi who, sitting by one of the partially open window sashes was the only one not to have taken part in the

general banter of hilarity. She forced her way through the throng and was immediately offered a seat by the rather reserved Simárdi. They glanced at each other, without trying to start a conversation, yet by their placid and contented expressions, they displayed a spontaneous mutual attraction.

He lifted the wooden clapboard based underneath the window and placed a napkin thereon and offered her homemade pastry, together with steaming hot coffee which he poured from a thermos bottle. She accepted this treat gladly and with closed eyes remarked, "It almost feels like home." Elated by her presence, a warm inner glow dispelled the mood of dejection he had felt only minutes ago. He was surprised by his own words, which welled up inside him and he could not resist to give vent, "I'd really wish that we could be at home together." The otherwise shy Simárdi felt rather awkward at this confession of sudden attachment he had toward this stranger.

It was with a degree of surprise that she perceived the depth of his sentiments and noticed the loneliness which lurked behind his words. She looked at Simárdi with warmth and compassion, yet puzzled by the intensity of the words he had spoken, contrary to conventional etiquette, which would have scorned upon expressing turgid, soul-felt thoughts to an unknown. Her eyes caught hold of the white armband, which was attached to Simárdi's jacket. At this moment she understood the melancholic bearing her companion displayed, he was one of the outcasts, a half-Jew.

For a few minutes they maintained reflective silence. After a pause, he introduced himself to her, while the young woman, Stella was her name, disclosed to him the purpose of her voyage. She was on her way to the Russian frontline caring for

wounded soldiers. She took from her purse a Red Cross armband and attached it to her tunic. The draftees, who were just before showing a flirtatious comportment toward Stella, changed their attitude to one of respect, as they noticed her status of registered army nurse. It was not customary for such personnel to associate with Jews, or half-Jews. It was clear however, that this nurse did not concern herself with such racial and military interdictions. On the contrary, she seemed to carry on an animated conversation with her neighbour, Simárdi.

Stella told Simárdi Laci that she was a final year student in the medical faculty at the University of Budapest and had taken a leave of absence to administer her skills to the care of the injured. She was not obliged to take on such a risky assignment, but her heart went out to the unfortunate suffering soldiers. Her father, an auto mechanic had scrimped and scrounged for years to put his talented daughter through university. Now, when she could have been so close to obtaining her medical degree, he disapproved of her decision to work at the frontline. But her mind was made up. It was with a heavy heart that she said goodbye to her father at the same time consoling him with the satisfaction they both would gain by her altruistic work.

It was hours that the train had been rumbling on toward its easterly destination. After midnight, all the enlisted men had fallen asleep. Only Laci and Stella were awake, absorbed in their thoughts, the absurdity of their chance meeting and the emotional closeness they felt toward each other. In whispered tones, they talked about their families. She retrieved from a shoulder satchel a small silver Red Cross badge which she offered Laci as a souvenir. With an emboldening gesture, she added, "Take it Laci, who knows, perhaps one day it might help you in a difficult situation." He accepted this token of her compassion with deep felt gratitude and

while caressing her hands, professed, "Stella, you have restored my faith in people, you have not shied away from me," and with increased fervour in his voice, he continued, "nay, you are risking your position by trying to help me."

She patted his hand reassuringly, not wanting him to over react sentimentally and confessed, "Laci, don't consider me as a brainless follower of the Nazi ideology. I don't judge people by their racial or religious backgrounds." He looked at her with ever increasing wonderment, as she continued, "I grade people by their inner worth and their actions." Emphatically, while leaning gently against his shoulders, she whispered in a hushed voice, "Laci, I don't know what's come over me that I have such a strong urge in wanting to protect you."

Laci felt like choking up with emotion. This girl was a godsend. Yet, he wanted to hold back from letting her know how deeply he felt for her. He tried to test her true sentiments by making light of her comments, "Come now Stella, you can't be serious about me. You just want to make me feel good, after all, what's so special about me?" She looked at him through the eyes of a psychologist reacting to a patient's inane question. Yet, her trained mind, defined the gist of his probing queries and she took up the cudgels. "You are a fairly good-looking blond fellow with brown eyes and a slight medium build," and then she continued, like a poker player showing his trump card, "and all this doesn't mean much to me. I like you because you are an idiot." The last words were spoken in a tone of disappointment and hurt for Laci having doubted her sincerity.

In seeing the disconsolate expression on her face, he did not take offense at having been called an idiot. He knew that she was only annoyed with him for not recognizing her deep feelings. And yet, there remained some lingering doubts in his

mind about her truthfulness. He ventured another searching question which he feared might vex Stella even more. "After having told me how much you dislike the Nazi ideology, isn't it somewhat strange that you should hasten to the frontline to help those very soldiers who represent this devilish dogma?" Stella's countenance displayed a mood of pain mixed with anger as she countered Laci's probing and unjust questioning. In a trembling voice, she responded, "Laci, just before when I told you how much I like you because you were an idiot, what I really meant was that, you were distrustful of me and naive without reason. But now that you insist on questioning me in such a different manner I'll really have to call you a dimwit for not seeing my sincerity."

Laci tried to interject that it was not his intention to hurt her, but she did not let him interrupt her. "Can't you see Laci, that the reason for helping the unfortunate soldiers is not for the sake of supporting the regime. I'm going to the frontline to spread goodwill and foster the hope that the war will soon end. In my own small way I'll try to tell the soldiers that wars cannot solve the problems of nations. It is only with the hope for peace in our hearts and love for all humanity that we can live in harmony, side by side."

Stella had become quite agitated in expressing her views. Laci reproached himself for having cast doubts on Stella's humane motives. He gently put his hands to her face and with reinforced warmth in his voice, he told her, "Stella, forgive me, I did not want to hurt you with my silly questions. But, please understand that with all the hatred I've seen, I needed your reassurance that you are different." And seeing her eyes light up at the sound of his heartfelt words, he continued, "You are not only different, but I think you are an angel if there was ever one." Stella was no longer frowning, a happy expression was in her eyes as Laci stated, "And you were right, I

am an idiot." At this, the tension between them had dissolved into muted laughter which they could barely control.

The flickering lights of the lanterns grew dimmer as the wicks had used up most of the sustaining oil. The compartments fell into an almost complete darkness. All the lads were asleep. She snuggled up to him while he put his arms around her in a firm embrace. Her dark eyes glittered with a passion. He searched out her full lips and they forgot the world around them. She did not resist his cautious, hesitating advances, nay she responded with abandon. They scoffed at the Nürnberg Laws, and satisfied their desires. They were immensely happy.

By the shimmer of early dawn, Stella scribbled a hasty note to her father.

Dear Dad,

This is Laci S. I have given him my Communion gold necklace with the large cross pendant. You know how much it means to me. But, Laci means even more. Please help him in any way you can.

As she was handing her friend the letter and souvenir, she told Laci that should he ever succeed in escaping, her father would shelter him at their country cottage. Laci, in turn gave her his gold Doxa watch which he had received from his father on the occasion of his high school graduation. He too wrote a small letter to his father telling him that Stella meant a great deal to him. He also asked his father to use his influence to have Stella transferred to a lazaret or hospital in the capital.

The train had arrived at a Transylvanian railway junction where Stella had to switch to a hospital transport. They embraced and kissed each other in front of the

enlisted men, amongst whom one could not refrain from wisecracking, "I'll report you to the race protection inspectors." This caused Stella to retort spontaneously, "Let them all drop dead." Once more they embraced tenderly, hoping fervently to meet again.

Four

Transylvania, a mainly mountainous plateau of approximately 24,000 square miles, was beheld by the Hungarian irredentists like a crown jewel of their aspirations. This territory, with their two and a half million Hungarian inhabitants belonged, prior to the post World War I Treaty of Trianon, for centuries to Hungary being an integral part of the so-called, Great-Hungary. As an active supporter of the axis powers, a member of the Anti-Comintern, Hungary by a decision of her mentors at Vienna in August 1940, was given full sovereignty of the Northern part of Erdély. This, to the chagrin of the indigenous Rumanian and German-Saxon minorities who chafed under the chauvinistic suzerainty of the new rulers.

Erdély, surrounded by the Transylvanian Alps, is an outreach of the Carpathian mountains, which peak at their highest elevation of 2,500 metres. Its topography is quite the opposite of their Motherland's Great Plains (Alföld, or Puszta), where seemingly unending vistas of a steppe provide ample space for farmlands, grazing, cattle-breeding and horsemanship. There is the equivalent of the cowboy, or gaucho, the Hungarian *csikós*. These inhabitants of the puszta are mostly dark-haired, small to medium height and of a fierce yet jovial disposition. In contrast, the harsher and more demanding environment of Erdély, with its easterly domain of Székelyföld, land of the Székelys, produced a more sedate sterner type of folk who were accustomed to coping with constant climatic and political turbulence.

We saw stretches of rolling, undulating valleys, dotted by oak and birch trees, hillocks giving way to craggy bluffs which elevated into an alpine landscape. The mountains were higher causing the air to become brisk. An abundance of splashing

creeks gnawed their paths through the dense forests, ricocheting white surf onto the rugged escarpment. Logs, as if pushed by unseen hands, came tumbling down the bergs, somersaulting into cascading rivulets and streams. The sights became more forbidding. Farther down where the unruly waters had widened into a mightier confluence, tall, lean, haggard looking, blond mountain-folk performed balancing acts on swirling timber, prodding same with long skewered poles into floating rafts. On a steeply ascending hillside, a dour looking young peasant girl leading a docile horse was ploughing a small parcel of land without any apparent undue effort.

At nightfall, we had arrived at the railway terminus of Déva. We disembarked, gathered our gears and marched toward the main square of this rustic, undeveloped town of 10,000 people. All lights were out, folks seemed to have retired for the night. The dreary darkness was breached only by the moon's yellowish gleam, hiding behind wind-driven dirty, grey clouds. A sprawling two-storied whitewashed clay cottage straddled the length of the town's centre. The most prominent structure which differed greatly from the habitants' sloping small tar thatched huts.

We were squatting quietly in the two inch high dust of the townlet's unswept centre, mindful not to disturb the residents' highly deserved nighttime rest. After a wait of two hours, the lorries, which were to ferry us to the battalion headquarters had still not arrived. The imposed silence and inactivity grated on the nerves of our army guards. They searched for ways to pass their time enjoyably and at the same time teach us some worthwhile lessons.

A drill sergeant's loud barking command echoed through the stillness of the night. The local's repose had become unimportant, now, it was entertainment time for the armed guards. "Get up! Gears and blankets strapped on. Company, fall-in!" Hardly

had we followed one order when another was bellowed to us, "Sit down! Undo gears and blankets." And immediately afterwards, this time shouted to us triumphantly, "Get up! Gears and blankets strapped on. Company, fall-in!" These orders were carried out twenty times. The guards fully enjoyed themselves. Some of the slave labourers could not keep up with the pace. They fumbled, they fell down instead of getting up, they caused confusion and utter disarray. It looked like a performance of crazed lunatics rendering a nocturnal ritual. The awakened residents gawked in annoyance and wonderment at this frenzied spectacle in their midst.

The sergeant, noticing our lack of military precision, perceived in this a personal affront and hollered at us, "You are not following the orders of your superior! Are you trying to make fun of me? Now I will show you who will have fun!" This time, with knapsacks on our backs, we had to crawl to the end of the town's square. The laggards, among us were goaded on by the guard's rifle butts. Again, some of us could not fully comply with his orders. Another reprimand followed, "If you can't do as I have told you, I'll make it easier for you." Another idea had occurred to him. "Drop knapsacks, race to the end of the square and come back, hopping on your left foot." We were exhausted. Nevertheless, he had energy to shout new orders, "Now, pick up your gear and come hopping back on your right foot and into a precise line up."

Suffice to say that it was impossible to carry out all orders as demanded. Even our knapsacks were uncooperative. While we were hustling and jostling to be as compliant as possible, the contents of our bags spilled out onto the dust of the square. The sergeant, observing this, arrived at another astute conclusion, "You are littering the place! You don't want to keep your belongings? You are throwing them away!" He paused for a moment while watching us with sadistic satisfaction. This

time, a new idea sprung from his fertile mind, "While hopping on your right foot, you'll pick up your stuff and pile it neatly!" He watched us with utter glee. While putting his right hand to his heart, he remarked sanctimoniously, "You see how good I am allowing you to rest your clammy, clumsy left foot!" Probably, he was waiting for us to confirm his generosity.

This drill sergeant was obviously malevolent, yet he maintained that all his orders were only intended to toughen us up. He thought of himself as a Samaritan. We glared at him with icy rage, we could not do anything else. The guards were pointing their rifles at us. After having lined-up, the sergeant seemed to commiserate with us, as his voice modulated with compassion, "You are too weak or unwilling to carry your belongings. We'll keep them for you until you become stronger." And with this explanation, his men avariciously carried off our additional clothing, food, blankets and such valuables they could lay their hands on. We were convinced that our stuff was gone for good.

After we were relieved of our possessions, our sergeant, the benefactor, made us hop around from one foot to the other for fifteen minutes. It was as he put it, to get healthy circulation back into our crummy feet. Looking at us with an expectant expression of approbation, he remarked, "See how easy I've made it for you to hop around without your knapsacks? You creatures, you must actually be enjoying it!" He most certainly did. Next we were ordered to sit down and "Keep your blabbing mouths shut." He also explained that, "Before you were not happy sitting in the dust for two hours, so I tried to help you with a little exercise." Letting us grasp the full extent of his good-heartedness he added, "Just let me know by opening your foul mouths that you are not happy, I'll help you again with a little hopping around." He gave us a choice to make, he was really soft-hearted.

The town's residents were unhappy with all the commotion. They called out to our guards, "God-damn you soldier boys, stop driving these Godforsaken Jews crazy." The soldier boys did not like these admonitions. The locals were vociferous. "Get out of our town. Get back into your mother's bellies. Let us sleep, we are working hard all the time, not like you good-for-nothings." This time the sergeant had to intervene, addressing himself to the aroused inhabitants, "I am a sergeant of the Hungarian Royal Army, as such, I have the right to do as I see fit," and adding more weight to his words, he said, "I am training these bloody Jewish draftees. If you people don't shut up immediately, I'll show you who is in charge here."

The residents did shut up. They slammed their doors and windows shut. The sergeant saw that everybody, although with misgivings, was listening to him remonstrated with us. "You worthless bunch. You woke up these poor peasants with your undisciplined running around." As a warning to us, he said emphatically, "I don't want you to do this any more." We looked at each other, puzzled as we had not realized that it was our fault.

Around five o'clock in the morning, twenty tarpaulin-covered army trucks had arrived. We were herded into them, fifty to a lorry. Finally, with some uneasy feelings, we were on our way to Battalion Headquarters at Bereck. This hamlet is in the most easterly part of Székelyföld. Part of ancient Dacia, the Székelys, originally a Turkic tribe amalgamated with the majority Magyars-Hungarians. At Bereck, in the county of Háromszék, we were to move into abandoned former Rumanian Army barracks.

Our situation had to be viewed from the perspective of the then prevailing political climate. Hungary, under the leadership of Regent Admiral Horthy, was an

enthusiastic ally of the axis powers. Their policies were also toadying. Their anti-Semitic benefits, albeit modified, became those of Hungary. The existence of Jews was barely tolerated. Young men were drafted into labour camp battalions. We were given the dubious honour to aid the war effort. At the beginning, we thought and hoped that through our work involvement, we might be spared the worst and could survive the war.

Resistance against the totalitarian system at the time we were drafted seemed a mere pipe-dream. Geographically a small country, Hungary was surrounded on all sides by fascist powers. Jewish people had no access to arms. Ethnic entities had neither the infrastructure nor the motivation to partake in armed rebellion. They were all praying and hoping that their just cause, represented by the western allies would triumph. Tens of thousands of Jewish men were forced into the public works service, a euphemism which stood for slave labour camp known by the acronym, KMSZ.

In the years prior to 1940, Jewish recruits were allowed to wear army uniforms. On rare occasions, they were even honoured to mount their own armed guards. The increased fascist pressure and Hungary's greater participation in the war effort made those allowances to the patriotic sentiments of the large Jewish population paradoxical, and thus obsolescent.

KMSZ men initially treated as members of paramilitary units, or adjuncts of the army were moving with the Hungarian troops into Poland, the Ukraine and Bjelorussia. Work, which was too hard for horses, too risky for dogs, too demanding or dangerous for soldiers, was a distinguished entitlement of the Jewish KMSZ.

At the outset of the war, dog teams, their tails tied together by cords set afire, were chased into exploding Russian minefields. Later, due to a shortage of dogs, or, out of empathy for their survival, KMSZ men, without mine dismantling training or equipment were forced into suicidal missions. Stepping on hidden mines, they were detonating them by sacrificing their own lives. Thus, thousands of murdered KMSZ men cleared the way for the always heroic and noble Hungarian troops, the torchbearers of European culture, into the uncivilized east. My cousin, Vidor György, lost his life clearing minefields.

By the end of 1942, due to stiffened Soviet resistance and the subsequent surrender of the axis forces at Stalingrad, we were no longer required to detonate landmines in forward moving frontlines. These became gradually resilient abridgments, but were never called by their true name, retreats. Debacles suffered by German, Italian, Hungarian and Rumanian troops at Leningrad, Stalingrad and other centres, altered the generally offensive thrust of their armies into a regrouping and rethinking of strategies to stem the advance of the Russian steamroller. We were there to help and bolster the Hungarian Army.

Five

We had arrived at Bereck in sable darkness. It was 5 October, 1942, a memorable day for us. The headlights of the lorries sketchily outlined the buildings of the battalion headquarters. After assembling hastily, we were led on our way into the dark countryside, guided by the unsteady lights of torches, carried by some guards. About one thousand KMSZ men had previously arrived joining our march to the designed billets. For one hour we alternately scrambled, slid, slipped and tumbled up and down and across open countryside slopes, thickets, ditches and boggy fields. Whilst all along, we were cursed to not tarry as the guards felt tired from looking after us and wanted to relax in their new lodgings. We had finally arrived and stood in front of eight large one-story high cement bunkers. There were a few steps on each end to lead to the door-less entrances. We also saw a number of wide open window apertures, graced only by shards of glass, providing breezy air circulation.

Facing these former Rumanian barracks were steep triangularly formed forty feet hillocks which were built to camouflage the bunkers. Two hundred fifty men were housed to a billet, with a three foot wide sleeping space per person on the bare cement floor. We placed the remnants of our plundered belongings against the wall to allow for a headrest. Our wooden trunks were placed at the end of our allotted area, which had to be neatly covered by a blanket.

It was now around midnight and we did not have food or water since our early dawn departure from Déva. To say that we were famished and exhausted was an understatement. The staff, after having satisfied their hunger and thirst stretched out comfortably in an isolated area with a centrally located cast iron stove. The

stove had ill-fitting pipes and dispensed a constant cloud of smoke and choking carbon monoxide. The only place which was not contaminated by the poisonous fumes was where the guards had hunkered down. On the other hand, it must be said that we were not direly affected by the belching stove, as we were bedded down next to the broken open windows through which we received a blast of cold, oxygen-rich fresh air.

The twenty guards and our sergeant were happy. So happy in fact that our staff sergeant, being the temporary company commander, could not help but show his paternalistic concern for us. After listening to our grumbling for food and water, he reassured us that having our best interest at heart, it would be better for us to shut up and go to sleep, which our bodies were more in need of than feeding ourselves. He also told us in no uncertain terms that the canteen was not set up as yet and we could not expect the cook to make an extra effort to fill our foul mouths. Noticing that we did not concur with his fatherly advice, he repeated in dulcet tones, "Children, go to sleep and don't make your father mad." Our new father had about five years on us.

Seeing that his admonitions had not calmed us down, he tried another approach. "Look boys, you have to listen to me, or I'll show you my bad side." So far, we had not seen his good side. Still in good spirits, and not wanting to be mean to us, he suggested that, "To make you feel better, some of you will have to tell us funny stories to make us laugh. No one volunteered funny stories. Again, the sergeant tried to convince us of his logic, "After some good bedside stories, you will forget that you are hungry and besides, tomorrow you will enjoy food even more." Our stubborn silence seemed to annoy the sergeant who finally lost his patience with us.

A harsh command echoed through the billet, "Everybody up and stand in front of your trunks!" All lights were dimmed. Suddenly, without any warning, the twenty armed guards unbuckled their heavy belts and started swinging at us. In poor visibility, we could not see where the blows came from. We had thought of resisting this horde of imbeciles, yet, they had the rifles. Also, at this stage of our recruit's life, we wanted to be compliant with orders, intent on avoiding confrontation.

The guards, swearing as loudly as they could, were telling us that they would teach us to follow orders and maintain discipline. We were trying to evade the heavy iron buckles of their belts and, in doing so, managed to trip a few guards who surprised by this token form of opposition became even wilder. Suddenly, there was a shrill whistle sound and the moaning voices of guards could be heard. The howling frenzied dervish dance had stopped. Lights were lit again. The enraged voice of our father, the staff sergeant, blasted into the stillness. "You dogs, you have attacked your superiors." Hardly believing our eyes, we saw three guards (Messrs Instructors), writhing in pain on the cement floor. Their heads and faces were bloodied. Some of the KMSZ must have knocked them down. The sergeant demanded, "Who has laid hands on the instructors? Get out with it or you will all answer for it!" No one replied. The retribution was imminent.

In a high pitched staccato tone his commands came, "Get all your gear and assemble in front of the bunker!" We hurried to comply and perhaps by a show of cooperation, perhaps lessen his intent of vengeance. However, there was no sign that his wrath had diminished. We listened with apprehension to his new orders. "Company, attention! Take your gears and leapfrog up to the top of the hill. Don't dare stop or we'll shoot!" His order was malicious and impossible to carry out. Even with the best of intentions, we could not be expected to reverse nature's law of

gravity. After a few tentative leapfrogs, we tumbled together with our gear head over heels and down the slopes. At the bottom of the hill, the guards belaboured the unlucky ones with their hobnail boots and for good measure butted them with their rifles. Guards from the other bunkers attracted by the commotion lent their gleeful support to our Messrs Instructors.

After awhile, our wooden trunks, not built to withstand such rough handling opened up and spilled their contents all over the incline. The sergeant relented, "Seeing that you can't even hold on to your belongings, we'll take them away from you. You will get your gear and blankets back after you have learned to respect your superiors." Another whistle call, another order, "Leapfrog up the hill and somersault down. After twenty repetitions, you'll line up for roll call." It took us about half an hour to perform the latest demand.

We had barely assembled inside the bunker, when a new chicanery was imposed upon us. "There are some gears and blankets piled up in the centre of the hall. Everybody grab his belongings, I'll give you three minutes to do this." We could not grab what was ours within the given time limit, as the guards had mischievously dimmed the lights again. Everyone took what he thought was his. This led to cantankerous discord amongst us, which the guards gloatingly enjoyed.

We were given permission to retire for the night. It was only after everybody had finished preparation to go to sleep that a new order was given. "Get your gear and all your belongings, assemble in front of the bunker." The previous routine was to be repeated, leapfrogging up the hill, somersaulting down the hill. This punishment was repeated until three o'clock in the morning. The guards had picked up all articles of value for safekeeping. Messrs Instructors felt satiated of our discomfort,

they had satisfied their penchant for looting and were ready to call an end to our education. We were told to go to sleep immediately because we had robbed them of their nighttime repose.

At five o'clock in the morning, reveille sounded. We had to assemble, shirtless in the front of the bunker as roll call followed. The staff sergeant gave us another of his pretentious speeches. "Don't believe that your punishment for last night's attack against your instructors is over. You were stupid enough not to give me the names of the culprits. You have robbed me of a good night's sleep. I am not in a good mood. Watch out you dirty dogs!" We were left standing at ease for ten minutes. We had time to look at our surroundings. Now, we could clearly see the outlines of the bunkers and the hillocks running parallel where we had our night time endurance exercises. We were in the midst of marshland. In the distance about ten miles away, were some peasant's huts. Other than that, only shrubs, bushes and short gnarled trees without foliage, rounded out the depressing vista.

The air was frosty. The Messrs Instructors were lined up on the rampart of our cement bunker. From there they screamed their drill orders for us to march up and down, bare chested for forty minutes. After we had worked up a good sweat, we were told to race across the marshy fields toward the distant village named Kilyén. In our vocabulary, the word Kilyén took on the significance of 'race toward that village.' It was not an ordinary long distance race by any means. The finish line had to be attained by different perambulatory means, such as rolling in the mud, hopping from one foot to the other, leap frogging pushups, one-armed and two-armed sit ups with the constant aim to cover the full distance. On the way back, we were given a treat. This time we were allowed to run the entire distance without any other distractions. The guards professed to have our best interests at heart.

The toughening of our bodies, a regimented healthy lifestyle which, later on, at the frontline would put us in a good stead. The only thing that these benefactors had omitted from their regimen was that one had to eat and drink, at least occasionally.

By ten o'clock, the retribution for last night's insubordination finally came to an end. The guards would not continue to exert themselves. After all, they had to shout orders, run after us and lug their rifles along. (At least if there were some trustworthy Jews who could carry their rifles!)

By noon, we had returned to our quarters. The canteen kitchen was set up. Food and provisions still had not arrived from the garrison headquarters. By now we had been without food or water for thirty hours.

In the afternoon, we were visited by Captain Mordényi. He was the commander of Battalion XIII. He explained to us that he would temporarily assume command of our Company 2 until he had found an intelligent, gutsy lieutenant to take charge of us. He impressed upon us that we had to become the best company for we had the exceptional honour to be led by the battalion commander. He was a tall, fiftyish, fastidious fellow with prim manners. He berated us for last night's insurrection and warned us against a recurrence of rebellious behaviour which would force him to designate us as a penal company, thus immediately sending us to the battle lines. And as an afterthought he added the humane words, "and you wouldn't even have had the benefit of proper recruit training." We pondered over this last eventuality and could not perceive any benefits enuring at the frontline from such schooling.

After a lengthy oration, outlining his credo of what proper military behaviour entailed, he ordered us to gather some shrivelled leaves which were to be found

around some knolls. As soon as our blankets were filled with the miserly foliage we had to return to our billets and spread this harvest over our bedspace, thus achieving a more comfortable night time slumber. The battalion commander's order showed his deep commitment to our comfort. During the night, we were to find out that the leaves served no useful purpose other than the foreknowledge that the shredded leaves would have to be swept up with our toothbrushes in the morning.

Around ten o'clock we were assembled with a promise of food and water. It had almost been two full days that we did not have either. The only liquid we were able to gather was some murky, dirty stagnating rain water, accumulated in the furrows of the bog. We waited one hour for food to be distributed. We were then told that it would be handed out from headquarters, as provisions would not arrive from quartermasters' before the morning. As for water, we would be allowed to fetch some at headquarters. This meant a torturous one hour march through the marshland.

After midnight, the second day in our recruit's life, we had arrived close to headquarters. The surroundings were in sombre darkness. We stumbled upon some wooden troughs. They were filled with precious water. We dunked our mouths into the life-giving liquid, ignoring pieces of paper, leaves and lichens. The first ones to satiate their thirst were luckier than the latecomers. They did not notice to the same extent the rancid, foul smelling taste of the liquid, the laggards were gobbling up. On our way back, Messrs Instructors informed us with satisfaction that we were really toughening up. The liquid we had drank came from the horse's trough. A left over they had refused to consume.

At the reveille, about half of Company 2 could not line up for the roll call. Stomach cramps, nausea and high fever took hold of them. They were forced by the guards to line up bare chested. Everyone took part in drill exercises. One hour later, we got our first meal. Hot black coffee and bread. The sick ones could not hold the nourishment in. They were allowed to huddle around the belching cast iron stove. They chose their bed sites on the cement floor next to the open windows to escape the fumes. They were left to recuperate for the evening.

A number of army battalions were headquartered at Bereck. Amongst those was KMSZ battalion XIII, detailed to an army division. A KMSZ battalion consisted of four to five companies with approximately two hundred fifty slave labourers each. We were ancillary units, subject to the beck and behest of each military.

The second lieutenant was on his daily rounds verifying the number of recruits to complement his roster requirements for food and other equipment. He was an officious bureaucrat with a foppish starchy demeanour.

The second lieutenant's wife was fully aware of our roles. For this reason she succeeded in persuading her husband, a tall spindly second lieutenant to assign a few KMSZ men to their billets for home improvement chores. If women are to look different from men, then this physiological axiom was amply corroborated by the pleasing shape of his wife. Not only was she young and raven-haired, she had a flashing smile, a svelte figure and well-rounded bosoms, which seemed to be in constant motion, *a la perpetuum mobile*.

KMSZ men selected for her domestic services had to be neat looking and muscular. She told her husband not to send her any cripples or slovenly looking Jews. After all, they had to lift heavy furniture, do carpentry work and take extra care not to sally her floors or smudge her curtains.

Opposites seem to attract each other and the second lieutenant could not resist his wife's demands, nor did he cease to cater to all her whims. He was deeply

enchanted by her. The sneers and innuendos of his comrades of being a cuckold, he mainly ignored, attributing these allegations to pure envy. He was enamoured by her, she was tired of him. He was an ambitious career officer, she was a former seamstress. Their liaison allowed her to occasionally give vent to her nymphomaniacal impulses.

Dilly-dallying with soldiers or officers was out of question. It would have ruined her husband's career. Prancing in front of KMSZ chaps, scantily attired in see-through lingerie was a safe outlet for her sexual day dreams. The KMSZ fellows, on the other hand would not make any physical advances being inhibited by stringent racial laws and strictly enforced military code.

As our fellows busied themselves with household chores this nymph would provocatively lean against their bodies and with bated breath whisper orders to move a sofa, or hang up some paintings. Our fellows felt frustrated at being prohibited to do some revitalizing renovation work on her. She measured the extent of her sexual attraction by the rigid erection of her labourer's clothed unruly phallic organs. The fellows who showed the most covert desire, were rewarded with extra food provisions and a promise to be recalled for more home improvement. It was a highly desirable assignment.

Undoubtedly, we were in boot camp as reveille was at five o'clock. Ten minutes later was roll call in front of the bunker, and naturally we were bare chested whether the weather was inclement or not. To improve our health we had running and calisthenics until six o'clock. Breakfast was at six-fifteen and consisted of hot chicory, a coffee surrogate and chaff bread. At six-thirty was the march and drill session which carried on until noon. Then followed a thirty minute lunchbreak. The

meal consisted of caraway soup, sprinkled with undefinable herbage or a gruel of corn husks, together with two slices of corn glumes. From twelve-thirty to four-thirty we were kept busy by incessant marching, goose stepping march pasts in parade step and present arms with our spades. Possession of these spades represented an implicit faith in our devotion to the fascist state, for these tools were brand new. It was the most valuable treasure the regime had entrusted us with.

The spades required the utmost care and loving attention by us. We had to polish their blade surfaces with sand or sandpaper until no smidgen of stain or dust bedaubed their lustre. After that, we had to work a coat of grease or oil into the blades until they attained a glimmering brilliance (to quote a Hungarian saying), matching "King Solomon's scrotum."

We were granted the privilege to wear a regulation army cap. By this accoutrement, albeit wearing civilian garb, we were accorded the lofty status of being any army appendage. We were attired in a motley choice of garments which, on occasion, gave our paramilitary appearance a frivolous cut. Our jackets, or shirtsleeves had to be distinguished by a yellow or white armband.

Our company and battalion commander, Mordényi demanded ultimate discipline, and never failed to exhort us to achieve a proud, military demeanour by showing exemplary comportment. After all, we had to render obeisance to our battalion commander who had demeaned himself by assuming temporary control over us abused wretches as we were. We had to make him proud of his Jews, his personal vassals. After the passage of a few weeks, we had gotten the knack of it. We became the best drill company in the battalion. Occasionally, though we felt like marionettes who, through a mirage had become grenadier guards.

One day, Captain Mordényi, his face glowing with joyous anticipation, announced to us a forthcoming jubilant event. Prior to Christmas, a march past by the regiment drill companies, including army and KMSZ personnel was to take place at Sepsiszentgyörgy, the capital of Three-Seats county. On the reviewing stand would be the county's chief magistrate and other dignitaries. The salute would be taken by none other than the regiment commander, a colonel.

Among all the KMSZ, our battalion had increased to 2,000 slave labourers, it was our company XIII/2 which had been given the grand honour to participate in this splendid event. It was demanded of us to be proud representatives of all KMSZ companies and to prove to the colonel and all others that he, Captain Mordényi had been gifted with extraordinary qualities to mould a bunch of undisciplined Jews into a group of quasi-soldiers. We were supposed to be delighted.

The great day had arrived. We marched twenty odd miles arriving at Sepsiszentgyörgy. The assembly point was next to the town's main square. We were given five minutes for tiding up our clothes, polish our boots and naturally last but not least, rub our spades' blades to a mirror-like brilliance.

Army recruits, totalling about 1,500 men had already passed by the reviewing stand. One company had encountered misfortune and shame by a few faltering steps. A miscue of the rhythmic marching pattern gave way to a clattering dissonance of hobnailed boots pounding on the resonant cobblestones of the main square. This caused the assembled dignitaries on the grandstand to lean forward, gawk, nudge each other and chatter in disbelief. The colonel was ready to explode as he stood rigid and grasped the banister of the balustrade. The unlucky company, marching in disunion shuffled their feet hastily to regain their military harmonious

gait. One eager recruit perspiring profusely, his hands wet with sweat, lost the grip on his rifle which bounced off his hip and tumbled onto the road.

By now, the colonel, who was nicknamed 'the raving one,' and livid with rage, could no longer contain himself. A proud graduate of the elite Military Officers' Academy in Ludovika (comparable to West Point), considered the fumbled march past as a personal affront, a diminution of his dignity and lack of respect for his exalted rank. He roared, "You have disgraced all army personnel." The company's commander was ordered to get the men out of his sight. He prescribed a one week intensive drill manoeuvre together with a halving of food rations.

To the soldiers he screamed, "You will carry out another march past by my station within ten days. Pray to the Almighty and for the sake of your mother's love that this exercise will come off without disgrace." And wagging a threatening finger at the culprits, he added scornfully, "I am warning you, another blunder and I'll make sure that you will be sent directly into the battlelines. You won't be good for anything else but cannon fodder." One had to take his threats seriously. He disliked empty chatter and indecisive action. He was known to have sent raw recruits for lesser transgressions into the centre of battle conflagrations. On one occasion, it was rumoured that he had sacrificed the lives of some soldiers by chasing them into a burning corral to salvage a few entrapped horses.

Shocked residents by the hundreds watched this spectacle of a parade and the accompanying dressing-down of the recruits. Now it was our turn to file past. Our company was not at full strength. Our deputy company commander had wisely decided to leave about twenty-five bungling and clumsy fellows behind at the bunkers. They would have only caused abashment and consternation in our ranks

and subjected us to ridicule and grief. These were the chaps who, to escape the reality of our degrading environment, withdrew into their inner-self, pursued thoughts of an imaginary long lost world, in which they felt secure and surrounded themselves with a cocoon-like shell of indifference and apathy. There was the poet, the violinist, the composer, the mathematician, the ultra-orthodox and an assortment of other oddballs, of whom their stories will be told later on.

Nervous apprehension ran through our bodies. We could not and would not fail. It was for our own sake and the concern we had for the clumsy ones left behind at the barracks. It was to show off the soldiers who had strutted ungainly just before. We had to show all the anti-Semites that yes, we could demonstrate discipline in our formations.

Our second in command, staff sergeant Komlós, urged us on in a homiletic manner. "Boys, Jews, I want you to prove to everyone that you are better trained and disciplined as the soldiers!" There was a pleading inflection in his tone, a relenting of the condescending and contemptuous demeanor he had usually shown us. And, once more this time, he was practically begging us. "Boys, show them that you are better than the soldiers," and, surprise of surprises, he added, "you all deserve to be in the army." This ultimate compliment or flattery was not without self-serving intent. His rank and career could depend on our performance.

A murmur and an ever-increasing jeer by the townsfolk's remarks were rudely directed at us. They, the good peasantry, were sure that we would fumble and stumble in our march past, that we would make fools of ourselves, and that they could look forward to a spectacle, a severe reprimand and punishment. The brave citizens jostled each other, they laughed and tittered in malicious excitement. The

army recruits looked at us with barely concealed hatred. We were not supposed to succeed where they had failed.

Our company assembled. Five platoons lined up in a descending order of personnel's physical height. Komlós moved in front of the company, followed at a distance of thirty feet by our KMSZ substitute commander. He was a Jewish farmer from the Bácska region (now Vojvodina in northeast Yugoslavia). A calm, good-natured handsome fellow with dark hair and a deeply tanned complexion. He had, if one may say this of a KMSZ, a royal bearing. He could not be easily ruffled. At a height of six foot six, weighing more than three-hundred pounds, he was a colossus. No one tried to get on his wrong side, not even the staff. In some ways he had the disposition of a docile bull elephant who once aroused, would tread under foot anyone getting in his way. Normally, he kept to himself, the less one spoke to him the better it was for everyone. He had the strength of five men. Appropriately, his name was Acél (steel). We stood at attention. Acél had a grim, determined look in his eyes. In his deep bass tone, he urged us on, "Guys, let's show them bastards what we Jews can do!"

Staff sergeant Komlós, our thirty-five year old deputy company commander regained his composure as he surveyed our motionless rigid lines as we waited for his command. He gave the marching signal and our lines moved with clockwork precision. We marched in complete unison, no other sound could be heard other than the thundering beat of our boots on the cobblestones. The louder we hammered our footwear onto the road, the happier we became. With every step, our pride swelled. The peasant's derisive catcalls had stopped. They stared in wonderment as our boots created a mortar-like salvo on the road. Staff sergeant Komlós glared at the peasants defiantly. Disgust and contempt for our detractors

stiffened our resolve.

Marching on the outside of our squad, I was wearing clog-like short boots with soles made of wood. A nail had pierced the insole of my right foot and drilled a needle-like hole into the flesh. This was no time to become distracted. The signal was given, our bugler sounded for the parade step to be maintained during a longer than usual procession in front of the luminaries. A hush fell over the crowd. Our spades brilliantly reflected the rays of the setting sun. It gave me a masochistic pleasure to bang my wooden clogs as brusquely as possible onto the road with every step that the nail pierced deeper into my wound giving me the satisfaction, "You dogs, you would enjoy seeing us cringe, but neither I nor anyone in our lines will give you this satisfaction."

We heard a loud voice coming from the line of hawkers, "These Jews, they don't even look like Jews." What was that supposed to mean? We continued with our precision marching. The peasants started to cheer us on. Our thunderous staccato march had reached the reviewing platform. Komlós' command sounded, "Eyes right, present arms!" Not one hitch. The colonel took our salute approvingly. He motioned to our staff sergeant to have the march past repeated. He wanted to see if we could do it again. We did. The colonel, after a moment of hesitation and with some reluctance in his voice proclaimed, "I don't like Jews, but you have proven to be the best drill company. I wish that you weren't Jews. I could use well disciplined men like you in my regiment." We waited for additional remarks to follow as he spoke his mind. He was not afraid of expressing his thoughts. "What a pity. I would mould you into an elite, fighting force. In one month you could have been in the foremost battlelines!" And, as an afterthought, he added, "What a pity!" We were not quite sure whether such an opportunity would be entirely enjoyable. There

was no likelihood of us becoming gentiles, we had to make the best of our situation however, always fortified by the colonel's wise exclamations in our minds, "What a pity that we were Jews..." It really hit home.

The colonel had additional comments to make, "From now on, I won't call you Jews because you are also soldiers." Apparently he must have taken a liking to us as he made a really uplifting comment, "I won't have anyone insult you any longer."

Finally we were dismissed. Staff sergeant Komlós' face was glowing like that of an old virgin who had finally been deflowered. We marched off the parade grounds into a quiet side street. Komlós addressed us magnanimously, "Men, I want you to know that you have made me proud to be your commander. And, to show you my appreciation, all food rations until Christmas will be doubled. Pausing for a moment, he averred soothingly, "None of my staff will bother you again."

We felt like we were practically in heaven. A sigh of relief ran through our lines. We had not expected any rewards. It was our pent-up resentment against the system which made us do well. The canteen wagon had drawn up. And really, we were getting double ration grub. Hell, we felt well. Redeemed so to speak.

Our staff sergeant had gone for amusement to a tavern. He returned just before midnight, stone drunk with a girl on each arm. He was a Casanova. He liked to twiddle his trim moustache. After midnight, he ordered us to assemble again in the town square. He wanted to show us off to his tarts. Trying to control his slurred speech, he bellowed, "Men, let's say goodbye to Sepsi. This time, I will take the salute." In a drunken stupor, and with the help of his two belles, he clambered up the reviewing platform. This time, it was our KMSZ Acél to lead the march past. In

a crisp, booming voice he gave the command to march in parade step and salute our company commander. In a thunderous unison step we filed by and in so doing, awakened the poor town's folk. They were no longer resentful of us. On the contrary, they thought that we were giving them a free show. Windows opened, they stood in their doorways, and they cheered, "Here come the Jewish guards." The sergeant's two conquests squealed in delight and threw kisses. A real accolade. It was embarrassing and ludicrous. The sergeant's face was puffed up with joy, the girls wanted to undress on the rostrum. Staff sergeant Komlós stopped them from doing this until they had reached his billet. It was comic relief and we were happy.

In the morning, we had reached our barracks. We were allowed to sleep until midday. We almost felt like pampered pashas and felt at ease. In our daydreams, only a harem was missing. In the battalion's daily bulletin, staff sergeant Komlós and our company were given meritorious mention. Furthermore, Komlós had earned himself, with our help, a three week long Christmas furlough.

After our initial elation had faded away, we examined our situation more objectively. What was the wondrous thing we had done which brought us recognition and temporary reprieve? It was only a disciplined march past. Was it such an exceptional deed one could not have expected from us? Was this parading the ultimate success in our life? Or, had the constant belittling and abusive attitude of our soldateska warped our minds? Yes, it was a systematic attempt of brainwashing to make us more mouldable to our superior's caprices. Only more resolve on our part, physical and psychological could help us overcome hardships. We could not allow the fascist's influence abort or divert our will for survival. We had to use our guts. The temporary easing off in our lives was only for a short duration.

Winter had arrived. We covered the open doors of the barracks and the broken windows with army blankets. Gusty winds tore at our feeble protection, resentful of barring their entrance into our midst. The blizzards, called nemere, in the local vernacular, were more successful in discomforting us. They put a layer of snow and ice pellets over blankets covering the exits which, through the convergence of warmer inside air turned into a stiffly frozen coat, obstructing our free passage. The blankets had to be pried away with pick axes when the nemere triumphantly showered us with a cornucopia of blustery snow.

Our water supply came from a spring which was out in the boondocks, about four miles from our billets. This time they chose Matyi (this was my nickname), to return with the precious liquid. Empty bottles, canteen cups and small kettledrums holding about five gallons of water were tied together and hung over my shoulders. I also took along a pick axe to chop open the frozen fountainhead. The nemere had dumped a foot of snow over the foot trails. Heavy, wet snowflakes mixed with blowing ice pellets swirled around and pelted my face with an obdurate hard layer of ice. The inclement weather was no excuse to end my trudging toward the destination. Actually, this spot had been outlined to me in a very vague language, describing an abandoned Rumanian bunker as the only landmark from where, in a radius of one hundred metres, the spring should be visible.

It was around seven o'clock in the evening with the piercing sound of the clinking and clanking of the containers breaking the desolate silence of the wintery scene. After an hour into my lonely trek, weird sounding long and plaintive yowls followed by short bellowing growls ricocheted through the vale and knolls. The thought occurred to me, 'who of sane mind would chase his dogs out into this God-forsaken weather?' No wonder the dogs were unhappy. After awhile the barking had

stopped.

Finally, I noticed a snow covered down, under which the outlines of a dilapidated barrack could be seen. My steps quickened as I realized that I must have arrived at my goal. Yes, this was it. The broken dark door and window openings, the roofless structure, starkly offset by the glistening white snow was the landmark my comrades had mentioned. The snowfall had stopped. At a distance of sixty feet I heard an unexpected patter of paws echoing from the deserted barracks cement floor. Three large grey canines hurtled themselves through the window gaps and dashed toward the thickets surrounding the waterhole. Momentarily taken aback by the sudden appearance of these cerberian guardians of the ruins, I continued treading on undauntedly to the spring well.

By a fleeting moonlight, shining through the leaden firmament, I noticed fine fissures on the icy grounds underneath which the spring water must have welled up. I set myself to work, chopping away at the ice and enlarging a tiny waterhole. After a few minutes I had succeeded in cracking the ice barrier to a depth of five inches, where I could reach a trickle of flowing, undulating water. Once having filled and tied the containers and vessels together, I hung them yoke-like around my shoulders. I was now ready to leave this wintery oasis.

My activities and the purling sound of water gurgling in the filled containers had attracted the attention of the three Cerberus-like creatures watching me from behind the thickets. Apparently, they must have taken flight at the sight of me, beladen with some strange things which while swinging to and fro around my neck made an intolerably, loud noise to their sensitive ears. Yet, the sound of rippling water and their obvious thirst made them lose their apprehension. They emerged

from the snow-covered bushes, their bellies sweeping the ground with ears pointed warily and casting sliteyed, flaring appraising glances my way. A distance of only thirty feet was between us. They stopped and slunk toward the outflow of water. They were large animals with bushy tails and must have weighed one hundred pounds each. I felt no inclination to strike up an intimate friendship with them. Two of them were slavering from their muzzles, they were lapping up the water voraciously as they were too preoccupied to show any hostility. Perhaps they had appreciated my efforts in providing them with the thirst quenching drink.

As I started to leave, the third canine contorted his wide black upturned visage into a smirking grimace. I stared at him intently. He and his consorts could fool me no longer. These were not friendly domesticated canines enjoying a nocturnal prowling, they were marauding wolves. I threw a large chunk of ice at them and clanged my noisemaking containers in an effort to frighten them off. They growled but did not flinch. I threw a heavy glass bottle at them and missed. The shards of shattered glass must have hit them. There were blood splashes on the ice. The wolves yelped and slunk away hastily.

I felt utterly happy to have parted company with them. I tried to make haste. The banging noise of vessels bashing against my moiling body grew more pronounced. The wolves' distant howling barks grew fainter. It was nine o'clock when I had returned to our billets. In front of the entrance, KMSZ Fehér, barefoot and in a trance, oblivious to his predicament, was languidly shovelling snow.

It was obvious that Messrs Instructors were once again amusing themselves with Fehér, he was an easy mark. The son of a poor village cobbler, he was a scrawny and cringing fellow who normally kept to himself. Being illiterate, he felt inferior to

everyone else, thereby giving the guards a sense of superiority which they showed by lavishing their sadistic attention on him.

This evening, Fehér was allowed to bed down early. By eight o'clock he had fallen asleep. One of our comrades, a former medical student had proven, much to the glee of the guards that Fehér could be easily hypnotized. Our enlightened friend told Fehér that by pressing his palms forcefully together, he would not be able to open his hands. All other fellows, our bright comrade had experience with had flunked this test. Fehér, who had fallen under this spell of willpower, became the only graduate ready to prove his adaptiveness.

Lights were extinguished. Guards approached our medium, holding flickering candles in their hands. They put a mirror in front of his face, shone the candle light into his eyes and commanded Fehér to rise. Transfixed, he followed orders. They told him to get dressed without shoes. Continuously, they made him stare into his mirror image. Fehér was not aware of what he was doing. He was hypnotized, thanks to the unselfish advice the KMSZ had given to the guards.

Fehér was told to take his spade and clear the snow in front of the bunker. He willingly followed orders. He was left standing alone, outside in the cold while inside the quarters the guards were quaking with mirth and praised their teacher for his intelligence. He became their pet. Fehér became our first casualty. He did not survive pneumonia. The guards were exonerated. It was not their fault that Fehér lacked physical resilience.

There was another fellow the guards had taken a shine to. He was tall and skinny with a pointed head and moved like a collapsing bamboo cane. His name is irrelevant, they simply called him "Hi, Stepladder." Stepladder followed commands with rowing motions of his angular frame.

This time they wanted him to perform. Thus, he was given an order to report for field duty. He was to parade before light's out inside the quarters, donning his garments and boots in reverse order and present arms with his spade firmly pressed against his back. It was a rather difficult act to carry out, worthy of a circus contortionist wearing his pants frontside but buttoned up on his butt, his jacket held together by its sleeves knotted on his back, his shoes facing the wrong way. He tried to take a few goose steps, ever eager to comply, and fell flat on his face, this much to the glee of our Messrs Instructors. Stepladder was unable to make his proper military march past. It was for this reason, to improve the quality of his goose stepping that he was made to parade for a week before his select audience of guffawing guards. After his further command performances and having crashed to the floor innumerable and lamentably, the enforcers had their fill of this uncooperative KMSZ. They put him on restricted rations.

We had some other types worth mentioning. There was our Jewish cook, a former amateur heavyweight wrestler from Kolozsvár (Cluj, in Rumanian). He occupied a respected position and was also a butcher by trade. He would not tolerate nonsense from anyone. His friends got double rations. Once, three guards invaded his kitchen demanding gulyás be prepared for them. He did not like this intrusion. They threatened to beat up on him. That was all the encouragement he needed. He heaved them through the door of his domain, one of the guards landing in a kettle of boiling water. The chef was forgiven for this accident as he was, after all, a

good cook.

We had our middle weight boxer from Budapest, a former champion belt contender and notorious street fighter. Whenever there was harassment of Jews in the streets of the capital, he would unfailingly show up together with a bunch of like-minded buddies from the slum areas, and beat the be-Jesus out of their fascist adversaries. Now, he was given the task of teaching staff sergeant Komlós the finer points of boxing. After a few lessons, Komlós had become the dominant fighter in the battalion. He had defeated all willing comers. He had become so over-confident that he challenged his mentor, wanting to prove his mettle. Enlisted men, non-commissioned officers and some higher-ups assembled for the big showdown. Our middle weight boxer danced around his opponent, flicking out stinging jabs which, on purpose, never touched Komlós.

Komlós had the impossible task of catching our fighter in order to land a telling blow. Finally, our man got tired of this back-peddling, leaned against the roped-off area and let Komlós hammer away against his body, while blocking most of the shots. Komlós was overjoyed with feelings of triumph. In his over-confidence, he failed to realize that our boxer only toyed with him. He shouted obscenities against his teacher, "That he would knockout this good-for-nothing Jew." Our fighter, who had shown restraint up to this moment, now saw red. This baiting reminded him of his Budapest street-gang fights. One short uppercut landing on Komlós' chin put his opponent on the planks. Our man helped him up to his feet. He could not let our staff sergeant lose face. Our fighter ducked as Komlós flailed away, trying to mount a counter-attack. Our man feigned surprise, masterfully tripped over his own feet and let Komlós pummel away. Pretending to be hurt, he let Komlós pile up points. The fight was declared a draw. The soldiers hailed the staff sergeant for his prowess

and spunk. They hardly took note of our man. Komlós however, knew better than the uninitiated that our boxer had thrown the fight. He gave up acting in a superior manner. Our comrade became his buddy.

Seven

Christmas time had arrived. An air of tolerance toward us had taken hold of the guards. Gifts and bribes by the families of the wealthy had their beneficial effect. The guards had not foreseen the possibility of being recipients of pay-offs. An impasse had set in between us. Now, they expected presents from all of us. Little did they realize that not all Jews were rich. We, who could not come up with something worthwhile had nevertheless come up with something. We collected toothpaste for the guards, the ones who had never seen any. They spread the dentifrice over their bread and while munching away, commented with satisfaction on the new and good taste of their sandwiches.

Parents had donated a sleigh and two horses to the battalion commander. The families of other officers received cows and pigs. We were given better rations, oat bran soup, more bread, more coffee and plenty of cabbage macaroni stew. We were being fattened up for our promised Christmas leave. First choice was to be given to the donors. We received our first mail and our first army pay. The non-contributors, myself included, had to wait for our leave until the rich boys had returned from theirs in January.

In general, I tried not to make any waves. I performed my duties in a manner not to be singled out for attention. This attitude served me well. Although I had never rendered material tribute to the guards, they were less abusive toward me than to most of the other KMSZ. I did not stand out in the crowd. My height, being neither tall nor too short, blended well amongst the others. In January, I was given a two-week furlough with a free railway pass to travel to Budapest. "Finally," I sighed,

"back to civilization."

On my return, I found that things had fallen back into their previous pattern. The guards, after their strenuous daytime teaching assignments were eager to be entertained. This was the least they could expect from us in lieu of payment for the education they were bestowing upon us. We also had to keep them happy by letting them partake in the contents of our food parcels received from the mother country.

One night a group of KMSZ made a table levitate. Together they sat down with a few guards encircling a coarsely hewn round wooden table. Everyone had to press their palm firmly against the table top while tilting the furniture up and down. Upon a command, through the tangential application of hand pressure, the table awkwardly started to spin slowly. The bellies of seated KMSZ aided in the circular motion of the table, lifting it a bit, thereby creating the illusion of a magical levitation. The semi-darkness surrounding the seance contributed essentially to the success of the experiment. The guards were impressed and slightly awed by the spiritual powers of the participating KMSZ. They did not notice the slight of hand.

We had other interesting personages in our company. There was the high school teacher, a studious type from Kolozsvár. He was the shortest KMSZ in our company standing at four feet, ten inches. Possibly to mock the inspirational height of Acél at six feet, six inches, our assistant Jewish company commander, the teacher, was given the honorary post of marching next to Acél. This ludicrous team-up carried the effects of a Mutt and Jeff act. However, the two were not to be made fools of. They always maintained a serene and indifferent composure.

We had another little guy in our company. He was a sturdy, knife scarred, dwarf-like pugnacious fellow. At the slightest provocation, he was ready to plunge at his adversaries. He was used to brawling. He was an uneducated Jewish former tavern entertainer and bouncer who had played his accordion, sang and danced on tabletops all over Transylvania. He was adept at crooning in Hungarian, Rumanian and the gypsy Romany language. The officers and guards liked him. He was allowed to have his accordion sent from home. He was a sought after entertainer.

We had our former musician who played with the Budapest Opera House Orchestra. In our midst could also be found a mathematician who having had Europe-wide acclaim, kept on mumbling to himself while trying to solve intricate problems in his mind. He could hardly be distracted by mundane assignments such as cleaning latrines.

We also had to keep our quarters spotlessly clean. Those KMSZ who reported sick were allowed to stay in, provided that they rendered peerless cleaning services. They had to sweep the bunker cement floors with toothbrushes. After performing such chores they would think twice before claiming to be sick.

Among the two thousand KMSZ who were stationed in Bereck some were activists of various Zionist movements. By word of mouth, we called them together to formulate policies for an early escape and/or resistance. The intent was to join the partisans, or Soviet forces fighting in the Western Ukraine.

We had planned to form a nucleus of men adept at hand-to-hand combat and the martial arts. These groups were to be coached by our cook middleweight boxer. Later on, we envisioned to train as many KMSZ as possible. I attended the first

meeting with great expectations. Alas, it must be said that the leaders of this initiative had become disinterested. At this, our first and last meeting, we gathered in one of the bunkers. The only endeavour the former proponents of self defence paid attention to was to improve their own situation by bartering food for clothing. It appeared that the community's interests had become subordinated to personal advancement and greed. It was with great disappointment that I had to accept the collapse of the resistance idea. The so-called leaders were selfish individuals. Everyone could only count on himself. This get-together had strengthened my belief in self-reliance.

Spring was approaching. We were on a noodle and cabbage diet which was intended to give us additional strength, preparatory to our imminent engagements in fortification work. We got our first taste of work. In the mountains, surrounding Bereck, were logging camps. In bright sunshine with snow melting on the bare passage bluffs, the run-off spring waters were filling to overflow deep gullies. We had to recover felled pine trees lying helter-skelter on the ground. High above us, swinging on the heavy wire of a primitive telpherage were logs riding first class to a sawmill in the valley. We were to shove, lift, roll and tumble the cut pine trees to the logging camp. It was not easy fighting our way through the dense forest with our cargo. Yet, we were young, full of hidden optimism and the conviction that our KMSZ life would not be too bad after all.

We found fun and laughter even in this, our first engagement. It was strange seeing logs which slipped from our shoulders, rolling down a slope and a bunch of us in pursuit trying to catch the uncooperative trees before they would catapult into inaccessible ravines. We did not mind this work. As the sun bronzed our faces, the

spring of this year gave us hope for an end to the war. We were nevertheless ready to move into the field and perhaps by sheer luck, find the Mongols of the lance corporal Attila.

Eight

At the end of March 1943, two days before our marching off, we were visited by field medics and a dentist. All of us were queuing up for dental care which consisted only of tooth extractions. The dentist had before him a cardboard box. Teeth, which he considered troublesome were pulled out at random without anaesthetics. Thus, I lost four teeth which were deposited in his treasure box.

The next day, we were given anti-tetanus shots. In order to counter the effects of the injection we had to jog around in the fields, bare chested for twenty minutes. After working up a good sweat, again eating noodles and cabbage for supper, we were ready for new adventures. The next day, lined up in rigid formations and the blades of our spades sparkling in the brilliant sunshine, we bid farewell to the bunkers, the home of our tyro days.

On our march to our first posting, outside the village of Kilyén, we met a few Wehrmacht lorries filled with German soldiers. They were lustily singing the verses of popular army marches. The melodies were snappy and catchy. One told the story of a little rose a maiden, called Rosemary, blooming on the heath, *Auf der Heide blüht ein Röselein, und es heisst Rose-marie*. The other song was more militaristic and referred to their Afrika Korps hero, General Rommel, *Es rollen die Räder, es dröhnt der Motor, Rommel marschirt in Afrika vor*. (The wheels are rolling, the motor is droning, Rommel marches in Africa on.)

They looked at us encouragingly as if they were expecting us to join them in their uninhibited vocalizing. Our fellows had no inclination to sing along with the

Wehrmacht, nor did they understand German sufficiently. The only one to be conversant in German was I, being born in Vienna. However, it was not my intent to let anybody know. Under the circumstances, it was the best *modus vivendi* to stay unobtrusive.

After a march of three hours, we had arrived at the outskirts of Kilyén, a village of a few hundred inhabitants. We were assigned quarters in haylofts, which accommodation suited us just fine. The fresh smell of hay and the softness of cut grass was an improvement over the cement floors we were accustomed to sleeping on.

The military set back suffered by German and other Axis armies at Stalingrad and at other fronts made the need for fortification works imperative to stem the advance of the Red Army. Thus, we were ordered to dig anti-tank ditches around Kilyén.

Although we were located about five hundred miles due west from the battlelines, our army high command had decided to draw up a strategic defence line along the perimeters of the Carpathian Mountains and the Transylvanian Alps. There, the forward thrust of the Bolshevik armies would have to be halted. Hungary ought not to be invaded by the Asiatic hordes.

Around six o'clock the next morning we marched out into marshy fields at the outreaches of towering mountains. The sun started to break through the haze rising from the bogs. A damp murkiness and the smell of peatmoss wafted through the air. Our company was told to build several miles of anti-tank ditches, snaking around the ascent to the mountains.

These tank traps were to be fifteen feet wide, ten feet deep and have sidewalls descending at an approximate forty-five degree angle. The surveying teams had staked out the distances and we commenced to dig. First, we had to eliminate swarms of tadpoles swimming in the swampy fields. The adult frogs hopped away in disgust at our intrusion of their territory, and bullfrogs loudly voiced their disapproval.

This digging work was unfamiliar to most of us. As we had progressed to a depth of two feet, we stood in a morass of ground water. At the centre of the ditch, a deeper channel had to be opened for the water to run off. At the side of the tank trap facing the mountains, excavated earth was built up into an inverted pyramid-like shape matching the form of the ditch. After a few weeks of toiling, a stretch of five hundred yards had been completed by our company.

Day after day, the sunshine got stronger. We were digging from six o'clock in the morning until six o'clock in the evening. In my group, we had fellows with varying degrees of aptitude for this type of work. One KMSZ was a former assistant editor of a Budapest literary magazine and a daydreaming poet. He possessed no suitability for this labour at all. Normally, he would just stand about, poking at the soil occasionally and wanting to sweep the earth away. He was a small fellow of slight build with large eyes that gazed around in wonderment. One day, while loafing in the ditch at a depth of five feet, he felt the need to satisfy the call of nature. The problem was how to get out of the ditch and he tried to accomplish this feat by himself. He stuck the blade of his shovel into the side of the trench. Then, by holding on to the shaft of the implement with one hand, while stepping onto the blade, he tried to lift himself up the embankment. This manoeuvre of the poet was a negation of the laws of physics. The spade, together with our daydreamer,

tumbled into the dugout. Our fellow persisted with his efforts tenaciously. He wanted to prove his agility. After awhile, with feelings of distress, he had to give up. We helped him by lifting him up to the edge of the tank trap. Now, with the shovel having been deposited at the rim of the trench, and keeping in mind one was not to desert the army's property, he grabbed the handle of the tool, searching for support. The spade resisted this effort and whirled into the air whilst our poet-in-residence thumped into the ditch. He was disconsolate. Never had he conjured up such problems in his world of poesy.

Another comrade, a stone cutter by trade, was a most down-to-earth fellow and one of the best labourers. He took pride in producing the largest quantity of dug out cubic yards. The sides of his ditch section were smooth and even, sloping exactly to the required degree. He knew how to work any kind of soil and was in some respects, an artisan.

This fellow, Barna was his name, felt however exceedingly sex deprived. On one occasion we worked on a stretch of loamy soil. Toward the evening, having dug his allotted measure of earth, he proceeded to sculpt the soft, wet soil with spade and hands into the upper torso of a voluptuous female. He became excited at the sight of his creation. We were all very duly impressed with his skill.

We got a new company commander. He was a first lieutenant and a pre-maturely senile person in his fifties. One day, while we were digging in the trenches, up to our midsection in ground water, a torrential downpour commenced. Soon, we were chest deep in water. It became impossible to excavate a channel to lower the level of the water. Our commander insisted on our continued work output by declaring, "You must work, rain or shine. Good workers will, in a few months, earn a special

furlough. The others, who might think of running away, will be shot.” Letting us absorb this dual message, he added, “You must consider this very carefully, once you are shot dead, you won’t be able to take your leave.” After having given us sufficient time to think over his latest reasoning, he commented further, “What do you prefer, working or being shot dead?” We could not enter into a dialogue, disputing his logic. A half hour later, a major on horseback came galloping by. Seeing us standing in our waterway, he hollered at our commander. “Lieutenant, what are these Jews standing in the ditches for? Are they waiting for Moses to part the waters, or are they fishing for frogs?” Our commander did not dare to laugh at these sarcastic comments. The major was a divisional staff officer. He shouted a curt command to our lieutenant, “Get these bloody Jews out of the ditches immediately. Back to your quarters.” Our commander, feeling downgraded by his superior’s outburst, hastened to follow directives. As a parting shot the major berated our officer further, “Dead Jews dying of pneumonia can’t work. Do you understand this lieutenant?” Our lieutenant kept his mouth shut and only nodded repeatedly.

It was August 1943. We had already dug miles of anti-tank ditches that followed the contours of the Transylvanian Alps. We had become proficient. This afternoon, we were given a ten minute break. We climbed out of the trenches and rested while leaning against the sides of our pyramids. A piece of dirty newspaper page left in the field by a farmhand fluttered my way. Out of curiosity I picked it up and started reading. The town paper described a local church event. Suddenly, a shrill whistle sounded. Sergeant Kovács, our new platoon commander, yelled at me, “You there, you Communist, you are reading Russian propaganda.” I felt dumbfounded. This allegation was absurd to the extent of being revoltingly idiotic and tendentious. For months we did not have the luxury of reading material. The presumption of being

Communist was also unproven. The Russians were hundreds of miles from our position and would not have made the extraordinary effort of risking their lives to supply us with reading material. But, such reasoning was not part of Kovács' thinking. Nevertheless, this accusation was made in a forceful tone and presented as a fact to a kangaroo-tribunal.

According to rumours at that time, the military command demanded higher work output by the slave labourers. Accordingly, disciplinary action had to be taken to make us work harder. Although I was one of the better workers, apparently I was to be made a scapegoat. A further group of ten KMSZ were charged with disseminating enemy propaganda. There was no truth or logic in these charges as we were all of poorer backgrounds and had never been able to render material fealty to the guards.

On the very day of my birthday, 15 August, I was found guilty. The verdict called for me to be hung by my wrists from a tree for two hours. We were led by armed guards to a clearing in the forest. My arms were tied behind my back and a rope was attached to a tree branch in such a manner that I had to stand on my toes. The rope cut into my wrists. The exertion was excruciating. I started perspiring profusely. My arms felt as if innumerable needles had been stuck into them. My heartbeat increased and palpitations set in. Yet, my resolve to fight the pain grew. Trying autosuggestion, I kept on repeating to myself, "It doesn't hurt, it doesn't hurt." The soldiers were walking up and down our lines. They seemed to enjoy the sight of the eleven KMSZ contorting with pain. Some of the fellows started crying out for mercy. This enraged me considerably. I yelled out to them, "Shut up you stupid dogs, it isn't going to help you any. You'll only make the guards happy with your laments." They bit their tongues.

The battalion's medical officer, Dr Szentesi, walked our line with his stethoscope dangling from his neck. There was a sadistic grin on his flushed visage. He examined the heartbeat of his patients. He repeated his professional diagnosis, "Very good, very good. This punishment will be good for them." There was no trace of compassion in his attitude.

I kept silent. I did not utter a sound of pain. I closed my eyes, not wanting to see the suffering of my companions, nor observe the guard's expressions of sheer malevolence. Dr Szentesi walked up to me. There was satisfaction in his voice as he declared, "This Communist has fainted." He put his trusted stethoscope to my chest. He exclaimed with range in his voice, "This confounded animal hasn't fainted. He's playing games. He is simulating." He could not control himself, "He's bearing the punishment the best. Pull him higher up the tree." They did just that. My feet no longer touched the ground. I was swinging in the air, completely suspended. The cords curled up on my wrists, turning me around and around.

This form of punishment was against army regulations, the convict's feet had to touch ground. Sergeant Szabó, a native of Újpest (a suburb of Budapest), and the commander of another platoon was the only soldier showing some compassion. He approached me, looked around furtively making sure that no one noticed him wiping my face and brows from perspiration. He had tears in his eyes. I could hardly believe the sight of one guard, among all the scoundrels, showing empathy.

For more than one hour, I was turning to and fro, suspended from a height of seven feet. After two hours, the punishment came to an end. Villagers had gathered outside the clearing. They yelled at our guards, "You lousy, cowardly dogs, just try doing this with us. The Jews don't deserve this."

Comrades rushed up to us. They entangled us from the ropes. My comrade, Forbáth, leaned over me. He thought I had become comatose. I told him, "Take the ropes off my arms." I did not realize they had already been removed. I could only feel lameness through my entire body. With the aid of our comrades we were led back to our quarters. I could not lift my arms. At night, in the local tavern, the peasants provoked the guards to a brawl. Some of the soldiers were badly beaten, two of them were knifed. A subsequent search for the culprits remained unsuccessful. They had fled to other villages. The next morning Dr Szentesi ordered myself and the other Communists back to fortification work. I could not move my arms for two weeks.

A few of the punished KMSZ had, during their ordeal, fainted and dirtied the trees with their excrements. They were sternly reproached for this misdeed and put on limited food rations. They suffered for months from nervous disorders.

A few weeks after our punishment, a high ranking general from the Ministry of Home Defence (Ministry of War) showed up in the area where our battalion performed fortification duties. He held an enquiry into the alleged atrocities the staff had committed against the KMSZ.

We were lined up for interrogation. He dismissed the complaints of all KMSZ as being insignificant, and the charges brought against us by the guards for being Communists as irrefutable. When it became my turn to present my case, which I described in curt and factual terms, he commented, "You Jews like to exaggerate all the time. When one of you sneezes out here, it seems to me that the walls of the Ministry in Budapest are shaking."

He was determined to trivialize our complaints. When he asked whether I had anything else to say, I could not resist from commenting, "Mr General, I am reporting humbly (this was the required form of address), that I have recounted my experience only briefly and factually. Furthermore, I am stating humbly that I have not sneezed for months." Luckily, the general was in a good mood. He accepted my report without rancour.

After having listened to both sides, and concluding that the work output had not improved with the punishments, he decided to make some changes in our favour. The workday was reduced by one hour. The work quota had to be strictly adhered to. Staff sergeant Kovács was transferred to another battalion. And last but not least, Dr Szentesi was replaced by another medical officer.

In parting, the general stated, "Now that we know who the Communists are, I want the staff to keep a close eye on them. I don't want to hear anything again about these Bolsheviks. Any more stories and I will send you all to the front for mine dismantling duties." (Dr Szentesi was apprehended after the war and sentenced in 1948 by a Budapest war crimes forum.)

In early September, we marched to another location which was not far from the Rumanian city of Brasov (Brassó, in Hungarian). It was a small village with the Olt River situated on the banks of a swiftly flowing mountain stream. We were billeted with the local peasants. Our patrol of twelve were quartered in the wooden cottage of an elderly Hungarian digger.

He regaled us with anecdotes of his military service in the Hungarian army, during World War I. In 1916, Austro-Germany and Hungarian troops had chased the

Rumanian army out of Transylvania. The recounting of those times made his face light up proudly, and he stomped around the earthen floor of his miserly dwelling, much like a rooster pronouncing to the world that there is none better than himself.

He told us of an episode when a Rumanian cavalry detachment tried to ransack a village in his neighbourhood. They were driven into the Olt River by Hungarian militia, perched atop trees. The Rumanian riders, terrified by the unexpected fusillade, which created havoc among them, fled panic-stricken into the river. There, the neighing horses, shocked by the frigid temperature of the half-frozen stream, dumped their masters. The men were struggling in the water, frantically trying to get to the other shore. They did not succeed in this. The wives of the Hungarian peasants set off mercifully, and pulled the grateful cavalymen into their flat-bottomed launches. The men were relieved of their ice-clogged uniforms and promised to never return. They scurried away in their underwear. Our old warrior was happily slapping his thighs and laughing out loud as he recounted those glorious days.

He did not mention the reoccupation of Transylvania by the Rumanian army in November and December of 1918. This time the victorious Rumanian army took revenge for their previous defeats. The Rumanians, or Walachians, as they were sneeringly called by the Hungarians, were not magnanimous. They treated the vanquished Hungarian peasantry harshly.

Yet, the two people had much in common. They were all peasants from the same geographical area, who had lived in close proximity for centuries. Their lifestyles and customs were indistinguishable. Only their religious affiliations differed. The Hungarians, or Székelys, were Protestants, whereas the Rumanians adhered to the

Rumanian Orthodox church. The differences, factual or perceived, were dwelled upon and enlarged by the ruling feudal nobility on both sides. Sowing hatred between the two nationalities was one tool the Hungarian magnates and Rumanian *voivodes* (princes) used to their advantage. The rulers of both sides alternately controlled Transylvania since the eleventh century.

It was ludicrous seeing our peasant landlord and other inhabitants of this Hungarian village denigrate their neighbours, the Rumanian peasants. The stereotypical slurs by the Hungarians, directed against the Rumanians, were unfounded in fact. If the Hungarians claimed to be a sturdy, tenacious and resilient race, so were the Rumanians. They could not be any different. The peasants had lived and struggled through the same history and the same difficult environment. These two people did get along well with each other, just until their overlords created intolerance and strife. The rulers of this destitute land were good at brainwashing the uneducated peasantry.

White-washed ramparts could be seen from the forests where we were building more anti-tank ditches and fortifications in the ancient Hungarian village of Ilyésfalva. It was built in the Middle-ages and played a significant part in guarding the territories of the Székelys (originally a Turkic tribe, who were assimilated by the majority of Hungarians) against incursions by the Rumanian-Walach voivodes and later by Turkish armies.

We had a difficult time burrowing around the trees and their sprawling roots. Limited use of small dynamite charges were helpful in dislodging obstacles. Our battalion made slow progress. One week later we saw the welcomed arrival of a few

hundred professional ditchers and well diggers from Székely. They carried with them a large store of tools, which we did not possess. They dug around the trees like busy moles. They were proficient tradesmen. Their trenches looked even with smooth sidewalls.

These peasants were mostly of short stature, tawny, gaunt and well-muscled. At dusk, the forest fell into dark and forbidding silence. They huddled around campfires or smouldering embers while roasting bacon on long wooden spits. The dripping fat was collected on large chunks of home-baked bread which they consumed with gusto. They were quaffing plum brandy and collectively sang sonorous chants of ancient Hungarian folklore. They were a contented group who showed a degree of disdain toward our guards, and conversely, signs of camaraderie and friendship to us.

A few days later, we were given different assignments. We were to grade terrain in preparation for the track laying of a narrow gauge railway leading to a strategic mountain crest. This was at an elevation of 7,000, overlooking the village of Botfalva. The soil was softer in this area and lacked natural encumbrances such as we had encountered earlier. Basically, we had to prepare the roadbed principled on the McAdam system, whereby broken stones would be spread over well drained solid earth which was built up higher than the surrounding ground.

This done, we carried the first few hundred feet lengths of rails by hand to the prepared tracks. There, we placed ties, bars and rods which were secured together. A flat-bedded railcart pushed along the tracks facilitated our work considerably by carrying additional rails to the mountain plateau. The downhill roller coaster ride through the village and to the base camp at breakneck speed was a much enjoyed

spectacle. A log pressed against the wheels was the only implement exerting a braking effect on the hurtling contraption. We had done a good job, our carts never jumped their tracks.

We had to build earthworks on the summit of the mountain range that would be suitable for hidden machine gun and anti-aircraft installations, (Flak, a German acronym for Flugzeug-abwehr-kanonen).

Nine

In early October 1943, after having finished our duties, we were on the move again. This time northwards toward the Carpathian Mountains to Ruthenia, or the Carpatho-Ukraine.

A few days before our departure, we were camouflaging machine guns nests. Two guards passed their time by throwing lit gasoline drenched rags into an open petrol filled cast iron barrel. Fortunately, for them and us, the subsequent explosion-generated flames flying only skyward and caused no injuries other than singeing our clothes. The guards were proud of their exploit.

In the village of Botfalva, while nibbling on freshly plucked sunflower seeds, and roasting corn cobs stolen from the farmer's fields, we saw the first overflight of British bombers moving toward Ploesti, the sight of the most important European and Rumanian oil refineries and installations. The guards became agitated at the sight of these enemy planes. We were glad to see the first show of Allied power.

Around the same time, two of our comrades, natives of Székelföld, attempted to flee across the foothills to the Rumanian industrial city of Brasov. They were caught by field gendarmes, and, after a short court martial, were executed.

On the day preceding our farewell to this Hungarian enclave, I accidentally met an old friend from Budapest. His name was Ganz and he was serving with another company. We were given this day off. The two of us were sauntering up and down the dusty village street exchanging reminiscences, discussing politics and prevailing

demagoguism.

These lands, Transylvania and Székelyföld were a telling proof of how unprincipled, power-hungry leaders and false prophets had set the two principal people, Hungarians and Rumanians against each other. The mighty had appealed to the same God to bless their weapons to be used against each other. The secular and parochial leaders of both nationalities declared to be imbued by similar laudable attributes and virtues. Consequently, God had no choice but to bless their aggressions, "He was on their side." Poor deity, he had a hard time choosing favourites.

It was a recurring theme of recorded history that leaders of people claimed to be guided by divine inspiration. God, or deities had placed power into their hands to direct the destiny of their nations, as they saw fit to do so.

They endowed God with human qualities. He created man after his own image. God had to be praised, otherwise he would punish his ungrateful creations. He could be flattered and he would be vindictive if disobeyed. The representatives of the omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent God, were their God-chosen leaders. They were given the powers to govern their people as they pleased by the whispered words of God, to which only they were privy to. And the less educated their people were, the better. Fools and lambs could be led.

I asked Ganz, who was a religious fellow, "Tell me, how is it possible that God does not intercede when he sees all the evil things done by the leaders of nations? Is He perhaps too busy doing something else?" Ganz did not like the tenor of my questions. "Look Matyi, the ways of God are inscrutable. We humans cannot

envisage the ulterior motives God may have. Our intelligence is too limited to comprehend." I responded, "This is a patently misleading answer one can hear to set the questioning mind at rest." He answered, "Look, people have believed in the axioms of religion for millennia. There must be veracity and validity in those beliefs if people have hung on to them for so long." I could not refrain to counter, "I don't want to get into lengthy discussions with you but, believing that God, who allegedly knows everything, controls everything, created us as His children, has human traits and characteristics, must be fallible. Accept either this assumption, or he is too ephemeral for us to understand. Furthermore, if he cannot be understood by humans, one cannot believe in him."

Ganz looked at me with an offended expression. But I pressed on, "If he is beyond our grasp, then it is presumptuous to believe that we could influence Him with our ambiguous servility. He must see through us." He answered, "You know, you sound a little blasphemous to me by negating God's powers." And I responded, "I don't want to be blasphemous, as you put it, I would like to believe in Him, but over aeons, millions of innocent people were murdered without justification and without His intervention. Do we have to accept His ultimate intelligence which contravenes human feelings and logic?" He did not hesitate to pronounce his opinion, "I can't give you profound theological explanations to support my belief in God other than it makes me feel good to believe in Him."

I did not want to continue this exchange of views for too long, but I could not stop from making a few more observations. "If God is all powerful, if He directs everything in the universe, He could have prevented the slaughter of guiltless children, because there is no goodness in indifference. Where are the biblical miracles? We certainly could use them today." He did not answer. He was

pondering over my expressed views. Facetiously, I added one more thought, "Or is He still punishing us for Adam having eaten the forbidden apple in the Garden of Eden?" Ganz could not be swayed. He persisted in professing his unqualified belief in God and religion. I told him, "If you want to believe, then go ahead. The point I want to make is that it is a paradox endowing God with human qualities on one hand and discounting the suffering of mankind, tolerated by Him, declaring that 'only men have done all the evil.'" I paused, and then continued, "Or, do we have to pray to Him, trying to fool and flatter Him so that He not punish us?" Ganz replied, "God has infinite powers and He has created everything and I don't want you to doubt this."

I did not want to debate with my friend any longer, after all, I did not want to lose his friendship, so I conceded, "If God is all that you proclaim, then you must admit that the leaders of nations are only using His name to rule the masses." And, reluctantly, he accepted this point of view. But, we agreed on the following, "If it is in the hands of people to commit or prevent evil, and not in God's, then the masses have to be educated sufficiently to not be swayed by demagogues, prevent wars and strife and live in harmony, not discord."

On a more mundane level, my comrade recounted a parable, he had just heard a few days ago. A man was comparing the national trait of Germans and Rumanians. "The German is like an oak tree, standing strong and proud. But when a mighty windstorm pounds its solid trunk, the oak will finally splinter and crack and crush to the ground." The Rumanian, on the other hand, is like a tenacious shrub or bush. Tempests might blow, rattle and try to uproot the tree but it will bow and sway in the storm and not be torn asunder." The Rumanian is proud of this metaphor.

In response, not wanting to leave my friend without a tale of similar character, I told him a joke I had heard recently. A Frenchman, an Englishman, a German and an Italian were passengers in a light plane which encountered flight problems. The pilot called for a volunteer to lighten the plane's weight by jumping out the door. The German stood up and said, "Heil Hitler," and bailed out. After awhile, the pilot repeated the same request. This time, the Italian stood up and yelled, "Viva Mussolini," and he jumped out. The plane's problems continued so the pilot made his hopefully last demand for a volunteer. Now, the Brit stood up and proclaimed proudly, "God save the King," looked around haughtily, and threw out the Frenchman." My friend was chuckling at the unexpected end to this tale.

In the same spirit of raillery, my comrade told me one more story of an Englishman who, unarmed, found himself, unexpectedly face to face with an African lion. Asked, how he would go about protecting himself, he replied, "That's easy. All I would have to do is show him my British passport and the lion would slink away." These stories had one thing in common; they were all generalizations of national character.

In that sense, these jokes were slightly distasteful to me. I had learnt at an early age to detest generalized views of people that were based on ethnic or religious prejudices. When Nazi Germany annexed Austria in the spring of 1938, we lived in Vienna. My father, an owner of a small shoe factory was an adherent of the English Fabian Society's credos and later an idealistic Communist. He, together with my mother worked seven days a week and late into the night in the small workshop. My father was a worker and he was concerned with the welfare of the working class. At the end of the week, he was left with less money in his pocket than his workers. He was not a capitalist. He was not the stereotypical Semite. Yet, the Nazis swamped and brainwashed the Austrians with their hateful depiction of Jews, all

being exploiters of the poor working man. On the wall of our rented dwelling, they put an enlarged poster of their S.A., (*Sturmabteilungen* Stormtroops) smut paper, *Der Stürmer*, (The Stormer), showing the Wandering Jew, an ugly, crooked-nosed caricature of a peddler, with a bag on his shoulder. This imaginative creature represented a generalization of a people. At the time of the annexation by Nazi Germany, I was a student in a technical high school. I wanted to be an engineer, and most certainly did not want to become a parodical copy of the Nazis' hallucinatory image of a Jew. We were not different from the Austrians. Prior to Hitler, we were accepted. My parents were workers, we were not ghetto dwellers. In Vienna, we were at home. We were not strangers. It was the Nazis who were the strangers with their despicable and heinous assertions of superiority over other races and people.

Again, it was the demagogues who influenced the politically illiterate masses. They appealed to their lowest predatory instincts of greed and exploitation of other people. The Nazis stroked the egos of their followers. They made them obey their twisted ideologies by repeating their lies until the populace blindly believed them. The masses had no sense of objectivity. They did not question the ethics of their beloved Führer and his gang. They thought to be led to the Elysium, The Thousand Year Empire (*Das Tausendjährige Reich*).

For these reasons, and subsequent experiences I do reject generalizations of people. If we generalize, we imitate the Nazis. People have to be judged on an individual basis. We have to shirk prejudices. Give the other man a chance. Tolerance, education, empathy and cooperation is the foundation for a happy society. Stay away from demagogues, be they in the social, political or religious arenas.

Ten

It was evening. We had to line up for supper. At eight o'clock, our bugler made his rounds in the village, sounding the curfew. Back in our wooden shack, looking out the window of our barn-like abode, I observed the stillness of the village's dusty road, the quiet of the tranquil settlement, and wished for an end to strife and hatred imposed upon the people by the power hungry potentates.

We were given marching orders to proceed in the direction of Marisvásárhely (Tirgu-Mures, in Rumanian), a railroad junction with a population of 100,000. This town was approximately one hundred ten miles northwest from our present location. At that transportation hub we were to board a freight train heading toward Mármarosziget (Sighetul-Marmatiel in Rumanian), at another northwestern distance of one hundred twenty miles. This place is in the region of the Carpathian Mountains which peaked at an elevation of 8,000 feet. On the other side of the headland ridges is the western Ukraine.

We were scheduled to march thirty miles a day. At six o'clock in the morning, two hundred fifty KMSZ, together with our Messrs Instructors, non-commissioned personnel and company commander set out on our arduous trek through the mountainous trails of the Transylvanian Alps. Preceding our procession were five wooden four-wheeled wagons resembling the American Stanhope carriages. Four of those were drawn by one horse each, the fifth contrivance was pulled along by eight KMSZ. Four on each side of the wagon's shaft, they conjured the impression of the ancient Israeli slaves in Egypt.

The wagons were loaded with the company's equipment, tents, timber and wooden planks, all for the use and convenience of the staff. The fifth wagon contained our mobile kitchen accoutrements. Our eight chaps did a better job at pulling the cart than the horses. They knew when to pull harder, how to control the vehicle rolling down a declivity and they did their tasks quietly as opposed to the animals. They never had to be fed while tugging the carriage and they never dirtied the roads during their exertions. There was one benefit though in doing this job. Every half hour one fellow would be spelled and could rest and sit in the wagon like a maharajah.

At midday, we were served a watery, sparse cabbage soup. We found out that our Messrs Instructors had brought along food for themselves only. Our rations had been sold off by them at Botfalva. They needed the money: not all females encountered on our safari could be raped. Some of them had to be rewarded with banknotes of the realm.

The roads were climbing. We had to help our eight wagoners by pushing their Stanhope. We were getting into the highest elevations. At nine o'clock in the evening, we came to a halt in a small Rumanian hamlet. In the vicinity was an imposing medieval castle laying partially in ruins. This settlement was built within a seemingly endless forest. There was only one main road. The tar and pitched straw roofs hung sideways over the low slung cottages, exposing only a narrow band of the exterior walls, windows and door to the onlooker. We were given quarters in the empty barns. Our supper, as announced, consisting of a meagre soup, was to be served around ten o'clock. Our staff, probably as a recompense and their feelings of guilt at having sold off our rations, allowed us to drop in on peasants and buy or forage provisions.

At the end of the winding road, next to a manure smelling refuse ditch, was a small dilapidated hut. The dying light of a small oil lamp cast a tremulous gleam onto the cracked and tape-repaired solitary window pane. I had decided to try my luck and banged with the palm of my hand against the log construed heavy door. A shuffling of hesitant feet could be heard and a creaking anile voice demanded to know, "Petru?" Apparently, she expected the visit by one of her neighbours. My knowledge of the Rumanian language was less than rudimentary. Nevertheless, I tried to sound as friendly as possible by responding in a soft voice, "*No, No, Petru! Puine cum lapte, u puine cum fasole!*"

Those whimsical salutations, mentioning milk with bread or milk with beans aroused the curiosity of my elderly new neighbour. She opened the door and took two steps backward at the sight of my tattered clothing and unshaven face. Her friend, Petru, was possibly a specimen of better hygiene.

In lieu of further attempts at conversing in Rumanian, I waved a few Pengö banknotes in front of her face and repeated my previous greetings. This time she understood perfectly. She motioned me inside her single large room which was subdivided into a section for a few geese and hens. I motioned toward the hen, put my hand to my chest and said this time only, "Puine." My elderly friend cackled, shook her head defensively, pointed to the fowl and put her hand to her heart. Apparently, she liked the hen and would not part with her.

The peasant woman poured milk and mush into a pot and heated this mixture over a fire of peatmoss. She put a plate of steaming gruel on the table before me and pointing at it said, "*Lapte cum mamaliguca.*" It was corn gruel with milk. It tasted better than it sounded in Rumanian. My old friend, also a kindhearted language

teacher, refused to accept any money.

On the walls were paintings of saints, and one picture under which burned a small candle, showed a fierce, hook-nosed mustached medieval warrior prince. Pointing to this portrait, I questioned my benefactress, "Dracula?" Frightened, she shook her head, made the sign of the cross and said, "Psst, Psst, Dracula, no, no! Voivode Michailo." To my knowledge this was the same prince which was the hero of the Rumanians, the cruel liberator of Walachia, Moldavia and Transylvania (Ardeal, in Rumanian), who had temporarily shaken off the yoke of the Turks at the end of the 16th century. He had impaled Turkish soldiers on long stakes and displayed his deeds abhorrently. For awhile, the Turks would be terrified in engaging Michael's armies in combat.

His adversaries gave him the derogatory name of Dracula, the bloodthirsty monster, who, by drinking the blood of his victims would constantly rejuvenate his sapping powers. In the folklore of the Rumanians, his spirit still lives on in the villages of his former domain.

After thanking my hostess for her kindness and receiving her blessings, she repeated the sign of the cross. I noticed the garlands of garlic strung above the walls of the door. I touched the bundles of garlic with my hands, and turned toward her with an expression of amazement. She held up both her hands, and pointing toward the street, said something like, "Diavolo," meaning the devil or evil spirits. Apparently, the pungent smell of garlic would ward off the malfeasants. In opening the door of her abode, she pointed to the hill on which stood the ruins of the castle, and said with awe in her voice, "Voivode Michailo!"

Around midnight, we were awoken by the sound of hushed female voices.

Rumanian peasant women had entered our barns through a rear door, having avoided our guards who were loitering in the front of our quarters. They brought along pots and earthenware filled with hot beans, vegetable mash and chunks of chicken meat. They resolutely declined all payments. They pointed to the corners of the barn and at their vessels, indicating that we should leave them there to be picked up later. They left hurriedly, afraid of being apprehended and punished by our heroic guards. These peasant women warmed our hearts by their humanity, much more than our stomachs with the steaming food.

In the morning, we assembled for our march off. In this village everything seemed to have a sombre dreary colour. The conifers had dark, drooping branches. The road was sheltered from the sunlight and brooded in an obscure hue. The horses, cows, sheep and fowl, all had gloomy colourations. The peasants were garbed in solemn dismal clothes. The lack of bright, cheerful shades seemed to convey a message to the outside world, "Keep away, you won't be happy here." Yet to us, these peasants were glowing with an inner warmth.

On our leave, the guards bid good-bye to the settlers in a charitable manner. The peasants ignored the soldiers. As we filed past the habitants, they broke into a spontaneous cheering and hand waving. We reacted impulsively and saluted them in parade step. This show of respect was to be reserved only for military or civilian dignitaries. The guards glared at us disapprovingly. They were not aware of the reasons for our rapport with the poor Rumanian mountain folk.

During the next three days, we marched mainly through Hungarian villages. In order to demonstrate our attachment to Transylvania, and to garner the sympathy

of the peasants, we sang a popular, chauvinistic marching tune with the lyrics of, *Édes Erdély, itt vagyunk, érted élünk és halunk*. "Sweet Erdély, here we are, for thee, we live and die."

The locals looked at us morosely. It seemed that they resented the condescending attitude of the Motherland. The only words of the verses they were nodding in consent to were, "...for thee, ... we die..."

On the fourth day of our laboured progression, we arrived in Marósvásárhely. We boarded an open flatbed freight train and passed through Mármarósziget. At the railway station we were greeted by a few young Jewish people. We enquired from them whether they were familiar with the area and topography of our next destination, the Tatár pass. They told us that the environment had possibly not changed since the Tatárs, under Mongol leadership crossed into Hungary in the 13th century.

We resumed our march toward the Tatár pass which is in the Ruthenian region of the Western Ukraine. Ruthenia, under the rule of the Habsburg Monarchy until the end of World War I, formed an integral part of their Eastern Galicia domain. This Ukrainian speaking territory, south of the Tatár pass, was annexed by Hungary in March 1939. Little Russia, or Ruthenia, north of the pass, had remained under Polish suzerainty.

It was one of Europe's most backward areas. The Ruthenians were serfs for close to one thousand years. They were, by and large, an uneducated and economically downtrodden people. We were apprehensive of this new environment whose language with the exception of a few among us, we did not understand. The

inhabitants were adherents of the Russian Orthodox church, and consequently availed themselves of the Slavonic Cyrillic alphabet.

After one day, we arrived in one of the few, isolated Hungarian villages. We were billeted with the local peasants. A group of them, myself included, found lodging in a well digger's two room hut. For our night's rest we were provided by the landlord with redolent hay, which we spread liberally over the clay floor. It was an unaccustomed luxuriant repose. We were to stay in this village for a few days, pending receipt of further marching orders to the Hungarian and Polish border areas.

We were not obliged to do any forced labour. The roll calls were taken in a perfunctory manner, recognizing the fact that many KMSZ labourers and guards had stayed in their quarters, intent on resting up for their next work assignments.

The well digger enquired whether someone among us would be interested in helping him dig a few wells. Barna immediately volunteered. He enjoyed digging into the ground. As an enticement he was promised a dinner of good gulyás stew and a hot tub scrub by the peasant's buxom wife. Barna was very pleased with these prospects.

In the evening he returned with his mentor, who was extremely satisfied with his protégée's work. He declared, "I've never seen a person work in a well shaft like this fellow, Barna. He dug like a mole. I couldn't keep pace with him as he piled up bucketfuls of earth." Then he averred with a smile, "He really made me work. I perspired like a roasted pig." Turning to Barna, he said, "Now my buddy, my wife will give you a good rubdown. Jump into the bathtub and don't be shy."

Barna was shy. As he lowered himself into the wash trough, this being a part of a sawed off barrel, he tried to cover his masculine protuberance. Noticing this crude effort, the chubby landlady exclaimed, "Don't cover up, I've seen such wonders already." He relaxed, stretched out his arms and legs in the cosy, warm water and let the woman give him a brisk scrubbing with a bristly brush. Now it appeared to be the woman's turn to become shy. As she looked at Barna closely, she observed something extraordinary. Flushed, a squeal of disbelief escaped her lips. She felt the need to admonish our friend. "Just stay calm and don't excite yourself." Then she stuttered in mock terror, "My, my, I've never seen such a large tail." And hurriedly she called her husband, "Come here, quick, quick, look what this guy's got." And they gawked. Barna felt like a scoundrel caught in a misdemeanour. The well digger exclaimed, "From now on, I'll call you Horse-tail." And shaking his head in amazement, he opined, "I've never seen such a tool."

The peasant's bosomy wife remarked, "I'll give you a bath every night, but you must promise that you will behave yourself and won't get any funny ideas about me." Barna, alias Horse-tail, eagerly promised, not wanting to hazard the enjoyment of nightly massages by soft female hands.

We also liked our stay in this peasant's hut. Our landlord supplied us with home cooking and at the same time expressing his contempt for the Fascists who were overlording nice, decent fellows, such as us. After a week's respite, which was filled mostly with useless military drills, we started out again on our march to the frontier region.

After a forced progression of fifty kilometres to the approaches of the Tatár pass, we arrived in a small Ruthenian settlement called Vóloc. We spent the night in hay

barns. During the next two days we repaired the village's muddy, potholed main road. Large boulders recovered from the adjacent fields were smashed by Acél into cobblestones of various sizes. It was up to us to reduce the stones to road strengthening shapes and finally to spread a layer of gravel. The peasants were happy to see us improve their main route.

In fact, so happy that the local priest's maid came to enquire from us in Ukrainian, if we had any good clothing which we would like to barter for eggs, bread and cottage cheese. Some of our fellows struck a bargain with her. She accumulated shirts, jackets and blankets, which incidentally were foolishly traded away, in three large baskets. At the entrance to his large, clay refectory stood the roly-poly minister of sacred functions, and examined the goods carefully, rejecting some and keeping only the better items. He was as thorough as an experienced haberdasher. In the end, he reneged on the trade his servant had entered into and released only half of the provisions promised. Our fellows, albeit unhappy, accepted the deal, knowing full well that they could not force the righteous gospel man to keep the bargain.

We were winding our way along a bumpy and narrow cart trail next to a rocky escarpment which was gouged out by the unruly waters of a mountain creek. We were advancing into the Ukrainian village of Hukliva, which was to become our company's operational quarters. The inhabitants were mostly illiterate, poor wood cutters. Among them lived a few religious Jewish families who were farmers of small parcels of land, dairy workers and traders.

Our patrol of twelve men were billeted in the farmhouse of a middle aged Jewish couple. The man was a veteran of World War I whence he had served as a machine gunner in the Austro-Hungarian army. He had lost three fingers on his right hand

which, however, did not prevent him from ploughing his small oat field and looking after his cows, goats and fowl. He also traded in eggs, cheese and butter which he bought from the local Ukrainian peasants. Latter had no inclination to exert themselves to the extent of selling their products in more populous centres. This, our new landlord drove his one horse gig or sleigh in the winter, weekly into the small towns of Lavocsne, or Stanislaws, across the mountain pass, in the former Galician region of Poland.

His diligence set him apart economically from the other village people. He, and his dowdy looking wife were well liked by all the Ukrainians for their honesty, sobriety and helpfulness. They would lend money interest free to their neighbours and would not press their debtors for early repayment. They would let the villagers refund the loans when they were capable of doing so. Their goodwill had a stabilizing effect on the community. The local Greek Orthodox priest would exhort his flock to take an example of this Jewish couple and to work harder and not spend their measly earnings on alcoholic binges.

Our work assignments consisted of chopping down trees, building flak encampments and machine gun nests. We were in woodlands where the inhabitants had not made much progress in taming, or improving the natural state of their environment. Roads and bridges were non-existent. Streams, or creeks were traversed across wooden transoms, or perilously swinging unhewn wooden beams which were secured with cords and attached to trees. It was a new adventure to cross over these slippery, joined legs which bounced and dipped unpredictably.

We were holding on to ropes which, at chest height, served as a lifeline for those who dared to undertake the acrobatic balancing act of fording.

Our poet-in-residence tried but did not succeed in negotiating the rocking traverse. He stepped gingerly onto the beam, while holding onto a loosely hanging piece of cord for additional support. As he took a few faltering paces, the length of the rope gave out. He stood frozen on the wooden transom, pondering how to extend the measurement of his supporting line. He had an idea, he wrapped the end of the cord around his wrist and tugged hard, hoping, God willing, that the cord would become longer, his efforts were however thwarted. He slipped off the beam, dangling above the one metre deep creek. He screamed for help, yelling "Help me, help, I need more rope!"

In a way, he reminded me of the fabled German Baron von Münchhausen, a cavalry officer of the late eighteenth century who in recounting his fantastic exploits, described an imaginary rescue with the help of ropes. In one episode he had, through miraculous efforts reached the Moon. His return to Earth was to be accomplished by attaching a long measurement of cord to a moon sickle. The rope was however too short. He solved this problem by continuously cutting off strands and reattaching them to the ends of his lines. In adopting this *modus operandi* he reached *terra firma*.

Our poet, a well-read chap, might have had subconsciously similar ideas. He would get across the water if he could only lengthen his rope. We pulled him back to his feet and escorted him to shore. He was told to remain there, standing solitary guard until our return in the evening and advising all travellers of the risks inherent to an attempted crossing. Our poet might have also rationalized that this rope bridge crossing should have equalled the adventures of Odysseus.

Eleven

These were politically difficult, yet paradoxical times. Jewish people, especially the civilian sector, apart from us, were harshly discriminated against. Life was made precarious for the Jewish residents of Budapest. They were subjected to constant police surveillance which was bolstered by a well organized informer service. These stool-pigeons reported the whereabouts of refugees and illegal aliens who were subsequently imprisoned or assigned to penal units. Jews were prevented from pursuing their professions and had to work in the lowest paying, menial jobs. Those who were unable to work had to subsist on communal handouts, or had to sell their meagre belongings. Yet, the government prevented the Jewish population from contributing to the welfare of the state.

The only group of Jewish people who participated in the efforts of the war economy were the KMSZ labourers. We helped the war machine, albeit unwillingly and unhappily. Acknowledging the importance of our services we were afforded although subjected at the same time to abusive treatment and many deprivations, a social status above that of the civilian Jewish populace. We were an adjunct of the army. We had received paramilitary instructions.

At the beginning of our recruit training, we were given lectures on the handling of rifles, and were apprised as to army regulations and military laws. Naturally, we were not entrusted with rifles. These contradictions in the common perception of belonging to a discriminated against ethnic group, and on the other hand being ancillary units of the army, did not negate the fact that we were imbued with a certain sense of protection, as long as we were working for the military. In spite of

all hardships, our confidence, or hope in maintaining this relationship lingered on until the time of the Jewish labour battalion's forced hunger marches to Austrian and German concentration death camps.

During the next month and a half, we were building camouflaged machine gun positions which nestled in the hilltops and overlooking the main highway leading to Poland from where a possible Soviet advance was foreseen. We became experts in excavating these underground defensive positions. These shelters were cut into the sides of strategically selected slopes. Eight to ten steps were cut into the earth and led to the base where again we pick axed and shaped the soil to provide for a bunk plateau, several lookouts and gun barrel firing slits. Later on, our carpenters would cover the inside of the dugout with wooden planks to make the habitation more livable. The excavation itself was topped off with logs, which in turn, were covered by soil in a manner to disguise its existence.

As one of the better workers, I was promised a two week leave which was to take place in mid-December. This was an entirely unexpected reward which only a few among us were fortunate enough to receive. It was one of the last workdays before my furlough. In the evening we were returning from our fortification work and trudged along on the muddy, narrow paths, homeward bound to our billets.

Our middle weight boxer felt depressed. He could not practice his vocation, he did not have any sparring partners or a punching bag. He was searching for an outlet for his pent-up frustrations. On his way home, he was glad to find cottages with wooden lathe fences. In a rapid fire manner, he punched the pickets into uselessness.

Returning from work, we would have to walk across two joined wooden beams which were placed over the creek facing our quarters. We encountered no problems scurrying across the ramshackle construction. After all, we had learnt to negotiate our swinging rope bridge on a daily basis. This passage was child's play in comparison, but not to our poet. Although he had been relieved of the duty to work on the rope bridge, having been delegated to standing guard on the hither side of the crossing, clearing snow for easier passage for our company, he was obliged to traverse across the makeshift bridge opposite to our billets.

Tonight we had a sleet storm. We hurried across the transoms to unburden ourselves of our tools and to warm up. A half hour later, the poet had not entered our quarters. We wondered where he might be. We stepped outside the cottage and lo and behold, the poet sat astride on top of the wooden beams, whining for help. Apparently he was afraid or unable to walk across. Therefore, he had lowered himself onto the crosswalk, straddled it and tried to inch himself forward. But he could not do this either, for the beams were too wide and he could not exert enough forward momentum with his hands.

We looked at him and jeered with displeasure. We did not like him. He was a work shirker. Work quotas were normally established for a group of four to six men. These tasks had to be fulfilled regardless of the individual's capabilities. The group which was unlucky enough to draw him as a partner had to do his share of the assignment. He would stubbornly refuse to apply himself. Instead of working, he would let us labour additionally, entertaining us, so he believed, by reciting poems. We could easily have stopped to accommodate him, had it not been out of pity, for without our help, he would have been killed by the guards a long time ago.

We called out to him, "You idiot, make haste and get into the house. Don't make a spectacle of yourself." He remained seated on the transoms. A Ukrainian peasant girl passing by observed his predicament. First, she chuckled and then burst out in an uncontrollable laughter. She hurried across the beams with light steps, practically dancing and spoke to our dreamer in halting Hungarian. Mockingly, she exclaimed, "I'll help you across, but only if you promise to sleep with me in my bed!" Our poet's courage sank even lower and with bated breath responded to this Amazonian challenge, "No, no, I can't sleep with you, I'm Jewish." The girl was shaking with laughter, and replied, "Do you really think that I want you, you of all people? I just wanted you to move your arse!" He remained seated, waiting sullenly for a miracle. Finally, having lost her patience, she pulled him to his feet, dragged her prospective lover, who had jilted her, across the traverse while admonishing him, "You, you there soldier, hurry up, other people also want to walk across!"

Around midnight, I stepped outside the cottage on my way to the outhouse. A grey-whitish snow slush covered the grounds. A dark, bulky life form rolled around bouncily in the half melted sludge. For a moment I was startled, seeing, so I thought, a black bear rollicking in the muck. Until I saw the bear split into two halves, one revealing himself as a husky Ukrainian farmhand, and the other, a smaller configuration, being our farm girl, our poet's Samaritan. She found another lover, one who was not averse to partaking of sexual pursuits in the frigid snow.

Finally, the day of my furlough had arrived. I received a safe conduct pass, free travel papers and army pay for two weeks. The Jewish family on the other side of the creek and across from our cottage had four daughters. One was uglier than the other. The patriarch of the clan, in spite of diligent efforts, had not found any

acceptable suitors for them. Yet, he had not given up hope. On his rickety horse cart he ranged far and wide in his continuous search and quest. Then a sudden revelation struck him, why not establish contact with the poor, wretched KMSZ labourers who were stationed in his village? Although these lads were normally confined to their quarters, there had to be a way to see some of them at his abode. And he came up with a solution. Six of these, hopefully eligible bachelors were given furloughs. The railway station was at a distance of fifteen kilometres. Why let them trudge through the snow, when they could travel in style to the train station on his bumpy cart? The suggestion of help was made to us and we accepted it. We thought it to be an entirely unselfish and generous proposition.

In the evening, around ten o'clock, we entered his dwelling with the intention of waiting for his Ukrainian coachmen to transport us to the early morning train. In the dank, dingy oil lantern lit rancid smelling kitchen, which also served as living and bedroom we crowded around a wooden table. In the corner of the room, seated on a wood covered parapet bench of their clay oven, were the four maidens. We could not distinguish their features or their reactions to the conversations ebbing and flowing around the table, for they turned their heads demurely toward the wall. Only when they thought not to be observed did they cast oblique furtive glances at us. They were religious people who had their own code of behaviour which precluded demonstrative female behaviour.

It was a male dominated environment. And thus spoke the patriarch, "Look boys, you will be travelling back home to Budapest. Life is better over there than here." And thoughtfully stroking his beard while rearranging his skullcap, which was dangerously slipping off his head, he came to the apparent reason for our presence at his home, "Over here, we don't know how long we will be able to continue with

our lives. Our cousins across the border in Poland were already sent to concentration death camps. Perhaps in a few weeks it will be our turn." We looked at him silently not knowing what to make of his monologue. Most certainly he was not suggesting that joining our labour battalion with his family would somehow ameliorate their situation. No, this was an inappropriately facetious assumption. We did not have to ponder for long to hear his further musings. "You know fellows, we Jews living in these border areas are not allowed to move back into the Motherland. But you nice young guys, if you would only want to help us, could save us." We looked at each other with puzzlement. We were not aware of having powers, or means of succouring anybody. We could not even help ourselves.

But Papa enlightened us otherwise. "I know that you are not religious guys, but you are Jews. And for that reason I am asking you to look at my girls." We looked at him with big eyes, before we looked at his bashful brood. What in the world did he want to prove to us? Did he think that we were that much deprived of female company that once glued to their sights, we could not take our eyes off his dear children? No, this was not the case. He had more serious ideas in his head than letting us purely admire the lovelies. "When you are in Budapest, take out marriage certificates for my daughters. With these papers in my hands, I could try to arrange for our entire family to move to the capital!" Now, finally, as the Hungarian saying went, 'the cat jumped out of the bag.'

The girls, hearing their father's pleading for our intercession, huddled even closer to each other. They felt ashamed of being treated as pure chattel. They knew, by our expressions, that we did not care for them. Yet, they also knew that their lives, in this Ukrainian village was at a perilous risk.

We told our host, "We can't promise you anything. We don't know the situation in Budapest. But we will look around, we will contact Rabbis and try to obtain these papers." The father looked at us with an expression of mixed hope and doubt. He was not sure whether we were sincere in our promises, or were only making empty pledges. Perhaps, he had expected something more reassuring from us.

The girls served us hot barley soup and bread. We gulped it down hungrily. They brought us a second serving. It was a nice, generous gesture of hospitality, so we thought. After midnight, our Ukrainian coachmen had arrived. He was stone drunk, but still coherent to the extent that he assured everyone of knowing the way to the railroad station.

Before leaving, our kindhearted proponent asked us for money. Payment for the meals, and for the ride to the train station. We did not want to argue, reproach or haggle. Each of us paid a week's worth of army pay to him. He was satisfied. We bid them goodbye, without searching for the girl's parting approbations. In our hearts, we truly felt sorry for them. In their piteous state, the head of the family had been grasping at all, even improbable solutions for their salvation.

On our train ride to Budapest, we passed through several documentation checks without difficulty. Our sunburnt faces, the army regulation caps we were allowed to wear, were all denoting that we must have been partaking in the military's business. On this account we were, in spite of evidently being Jewish, as proven by our yellow armbands, given a degree of respect. Train employees and civilians were palefaces, in comparison to us and were apparently engaged to benefit the war effort.

Just before reaching the capital, we passed by a Waffen SS (army brigade) train heading toward the front. The SS lads were lustily singing a favourite Nazi march, whose lyrics, if comprehended by the uninitiated would not have been appreciated by many. This Teutonic ballad went like this: *Wir werden marschieren, wenn alles in Scherben zerfällt, denn heute gehört uns Deutschland, und morgen die ganze Welt !* Translated it meant, "We are going to march on, whether everything breaks into shards, for today, ours is Germany, and tomorrow the whole world!"

There you had it, the new master race, the real chosen people of this decade, and (with puffed up cheeks and bellies bloating in triumph) the precursors of the *das Tausendjährige Reich*, the Empire of the Millennium. It was the advent of the *Götterdämmerung*, the "Dawn of the Gods." The dawn of the German-Aryan Gods, as proclaimed by their new deity, Adolf Hitler, né Schücklgruber. The world and all people could go to hell, as long as the eugenically pure and oh so righteous German Aryans could squeeze the other nations and races to death, all for the benefit of (to paraphrase) *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*.

We approached the Motherland with a measure of apprehension. The Hungarian Army had suffered tremendous losses at the Russian front. These debacles had persuaded certain Hungarian government circles in August 1943 to approach the Allied powers with peace feelers. The negotiations proved to be sterile. The backlash of this failure resulted in strengthening the resolve of those government ministers who had tied their fortunes to an even closer alliance with Nazi Germany. Rumours circulated that segments of the government would welcome a German army presence in Hungary. These reports which gained in intensity, seemed to presage a fateful turn for the worse for Hungary's Jews. The security net which Hungary's government had spread over its Jewish citizens, in not acceding to Nazi

Germany's demands for their deportation, seemed to fray and come asunder.

The news, which filtered out from Nazi occupied Poland, was an ill omen for Hungary's Jews. During the period of July to October 1942, and estimated 300,000 of Warsaw's Jews were either murdered or deported to concentration death camps. We had heard of the Warsaw ghetto uprising when in April 1943, after a seven week long stubborn and hopeless resistance against a superior Nazi war machinery, close to 70,000 people were eliminated. We could not refuse to believe that anything similar, a destruction of Hungary's Jews would occur.

I arrived at the Budapest Eastern Railway station (Leleti pálya udvar) around eight o'clock in the evening. I slung my small haversack across my shoulder, stuck my army cap into my pocket and walked into the men's washroom. In a cubicle I turned my jacket inside out, thus hiding the sleeve with the despicable yellow armband from view. After having accomplished this metamorphosis from a KMSZ to a civilian exterior, I left the station, fully aware of the dangers inherent of playing a ruse on the powers to be.

I had to look and behave like a civilian. I walked with a slouch, I assumed a bland and phlegmatic expression and refrained from gawking about curiously to absorb the changed ambiance of Budapest. Most street lights were not lit. The few which were functioning cast a dim light onto the darkened buildings whose windows were like blind mirrors, opaque and tape reinforced. A small number of streetcars packed with people were idling by. The majority of would be passengers, tired of waiting for transportation, filled the sidewalks and hurried to their destination with sombre and dejected expressions.

I thought it wiser to avoid the cramped quarters of a streetcar and joined the anonymous multitude on the streets. I walked briskly on the well-known boulevards of the capital, happy on being an unrecognized part of the crowd and making my way unhindered to the rented room of my mother.

It was a very happy reunion for both of us. We had not seen each other for one year and we were not sure whether the rare letters we were able to exchange were recounting the real truth of our situation, or were only embellished to lighten our worries.

On my arrival she showed me some clothing, a blanket and a fur-lined jacket which she had been able to obtain from a Jewish community warehouse. She had been working in a basement factory, fifty hours a week sewing leather uppers for army boots. Even this income at minimum wage rates, however hard to sustain, was a welcomed solution to her problems. At least it covered her rent payments and the purchase of meagre food rations. I was not in a position to help her financially. The remainder of my army pay was all that I could offer her and she refused to accept it.

The next day I met her oldest brother, a psychographologue, well-known in Central Europe. His name was E.A. Brahm and was an exceedingly well read man, versed in medical research, psychology, biology and astronomy. His psychoanalytical work, related to his research on character and physio traits, based also on variances in hand writing samples, had won him acclaim not only in wide circles of the populace, but recognition and praise from judicial and medical personages. On many occasions he had been consulted by courts to describe the physical and psychological makeup of criminals. After having examined a handwriting sample, he

could not only establish the sex, approximate age and medical conditions of persons, he would draw anatomical sketches of individuals, pin-pointing the location of any irregularities. In several instances he had been working with Dr Wagner-Jauregg, a Nobel prize winning Austrian neurologist. E.A. Brahm had written a book, which was widely circulated with the title of "Handwriting, the Mirror of the Soul."

His fiancée, L. (Lycie) Nyikora, was a descendant of a Transdanubian Catholic baronet. They intended to marry after the war, when they hoped for victory of the Allies would abolish all race restrictions. One of her relatives was the Bishop of the diocese of Veszprém, a provincial capital.

I had a lengthy discourse with E.A. Brahm concerning the morals of war. He expounded his theories relevant to narrow minded power elites who, through millennia, had brainwashed their populations. "Look at the Nazis, for instance," he commented, "they have succeeded in confounding an educated citizenry by elevating their self-esteem to the level of implausible and arrogant superiority." As I nodded in agreement, he continued, "They have subverted the minds of otherwise intelligent people by justifying suppression, oppression, persecution, nay, mass murder, which were all sanctioned by a sacrosanct judiciary system. An intolerant supremacist state is catering to the rapacious hunger for greed of the masses.

As he paused, and I mused over his words, he elucidated further, "For thousands of years the powerful have manipulated their people and led them into wars and suffering. It was never the choice of the ordinary man to settle their economic problems by war." I was sure that he wanted to enlarge on these views which thoroughly occupied his mind, so I felt no hesitation in asking, "Tell me, in your

opinion, how did wars come about to settle differences amongst nations?" He responded with conviction, "Wars were caused by the arrogance of a small clique who were swayed by the infallibility of their ideas and their mystical call to enhance the unassailable cult of their personalities." I responded, "But all this sounds very complicated. How did these rulers convince their people to follow them?" He replied, "Actually, there is quite a simple explanation for this. The masses at large, were kept in economic straight jackets thus, they were prevented from gaining sufficient education to see the wrong doings of their masters." I remarked, "If one follows the logical line of your reasoning, then it is obvious that the so called leaders of nations did not care about the welfare of their people, they were only interested in maintaining their power base and were supported in these endeavours by law makers, political demagogues and heads of clergy." He replied, "This is the very point I was trying to convey to you and it is unthinkable that the leaders of any given nation should have a monopoly on intelligent solutions for the problems of other countries. It is impossible to assume, other than giving legitimacy to the haughty disdain and rejection of other people's ideas and rights, that one is the possessor of all noble and worthwhile innovations."

After this lengthy discussion, I was curious to find out whether he saw a possibility or method of preventing future wars. He replied, "Judging by history, this seems very unlikely. Man is a predatory animal. He will find justification and rationalization to launch wars and kill his fellow man." And with more emphasis, he added, "The only salvation lies in hope." With a puzzled countenance, I asked, "Would you be more specific than that." And he responded, "Yes, in hope. In hope that the people of the world will become more civilized and educated. That they will have a level of education approximating or equalling that of the power elite. Then they will have more say in the governing of nations."

He was on a roll. His voice became more animated as he further expressed his views, "That by having more education, they will open their eyes, ears and minds to other nations. That they will take good ideas from other countries and apply them to their own problems. That they will abandon the arrogance of power and instead be influenced by the force of global tolerance and intellect." He sounded like a missionary and I told him so. I then added, "How would you go about settling international disputes?" He replied, "By an international forum of the best minds of all nations, which would have to find well reasoned and binding arbitration to international problems. These decisions would clearly indicate the benefits accruing to all." I told him that this again sounded like wishful thinking. He told me, "No, I don't agree with you. The best intellects have to find equitable solutions to disputes. War is an admission of the defeat of intellect and an affirmation of man's arrogance."

After a short silence, he concluded, "Hope is the only incentive man can have that wars will be avoided. This and hopefully the last world conflagration would show mankind the futility in wars. All wars can be avoided if we negotiate with others and compromise. We must accept the rights and good ideas of others and decide to live in harmony." This time I had to agree with him. "Really, there is no other encouragement available but hope. Hope that this war will end all wars and hope that humanity will come to its senses and settle all differences peacefully and reasonably. If nothing else, one must believe, one must hope that this war will force people to stop their leaders from embarking upon future wars." And pensively I added, "I think you are right, universal, higher education will be a powerful contributor in such an effort."

E.A. Brahm was known and liked by many influential people. They were aware of his ethnic background and continued associating with him until it would have become politically detrimental to their status. One of his acquaintances was the wife of the most rabid anti-Semite, an aristocrat who was the original leader of the Awakening Magyars (Ébredő Magyarok). Toward the end of 1944, while her husband was on his rabble-rousing tours of the country, abetting in the roundup of Jews for deportation, his wife was sheltering the latter and also the frequent guest of socially prominent circles, my uncle, Mr Brahm, at her manor. For a short time it was a safe refuge, for no one, least her husband, would have suspected the baroness of shielding a racial outcast. At the beginning of 1945, while Russian tanks under the command of Marshal Tolbukhin, were battling their way into Buda (the older western part of Budapest), Mr Brahm was convalescing there in a sanatorium. Roving gangs of marauding young hoodlums belonging to the fascist Arrowcross party, invaded the premises of the lazaret. They shot all Jewish patients, they burnt the premises to the ground. Mr Brahm, a pacifist, a dreamer, a believer in the goodness of man was slain. He was not to see the advent of hope.

Lycie Nyikora worked as a vice-principal at a Lyceum, a Catholic high school for girls. She was in her forties, of medium build, blond and with a constant smile on her face. She had an aura of intelligence, compassion and loyalty about her. When we met, she mentioned her faith in divine guidance and protection. My remarks that it was beyond my grasp and the comprehension of intelligent people, as much as they might try, to see logic in the deeds of God. Believers in religion were killed, non-believers were spared. Kind-hearted, generous people lost their lives and scoundrels were saved to continue with their misdeeds. And the most cruel, to the human mind in explainable misfortune was that which caused the murder of small, innocent children. Truly, one had to feel extreme unction in divine love, if one could

graciously accept the suffering of the guiltless.

Lycie Nyikora's faith was too strong to question the acts of God. She expressed her views calmly, yet with conviction, "We humans are too insignificant, like ants, to understand the whys of God's will. All we can do is accept our smallness and believe in His eternal love and protection." I did not want to express any differing views sensing the sincerity of her feelings and knowing of her religious devotion and altruism. From her purse, she took a small silver amulet which she handed to me. "This design of St Elizabeth, patron saint of Hungary, was blessed by the Holy Father." Noticing my astonished expression, she continued, "There are only a few of these amulets in Hungary. This one was given to my relative, the Bishop of Veszprém by the Pope at the last Eucharistic Congress." I accepted her cherished gift which, I was sure of, she did not part lightly and remarked, "I do appreciate your kindness in giving me this precious memento. But, I have to ask you, for what reason are you doing this?" She looked at me with puzzlement, as if the answer was self-evident. "Don't you know what this amulet will mean to you? This design will protect you from all evil and harm!" Noticing that I had listened to her intently, she continued, "Carry this amulet all the time on your person. It will give you strength and hope. Hope, first of all that the war will end soon, and secondly that all people will live righteously and in peace." And with emphasis she added, "You must hope!"

I thanked Lycie Nyikora again. I knew that she was a sincere and good person. I put the amulet into my shirt pocket and decided more out of curiosity than conviction, to guard the token of divine protection until the end of the war.

Mrs Lycie Nyikora survived the war. In 1945, she obtained a document attesting to the fact that she was the widow of E.A. Brahm.

Twelve

The husband of one of my mother's younger sister was a Viennese lawyer. He was the scion of a family of lawyers. His father had obtained the honorary title of Hofrat (counsellor to the Habsburg Imperial Court). Having fled from Nazi-occupied Austria, he lived illegally in Budapest. He had acquired a rudimentary knowledge of the Hungarian language which helped him to be apprised of politically dangerous situations. After his marriage, and living in the apartment of his brother-in-law, a well known Budapest surgeon, he gained a measure of security and legitimacy. He was provided with false Hungarian identification papers. In spite of this, he lived in constant fear of a police (razzia) raid.

We had a good personal rapport with each other. We were both born in Vienna, spoke German and reminisced about the good old days when life in our city was pervaded by the famous Viennese charm, or Gemütlichkeit. We both had experienced the shattering realization that behind the cheerful, easygoing facade of the Austrians, lurked a deceitful, duplicitous character trait.

The day before Anschluss (annexation), functionaries, civil servants, teachers, priests, unionized workers, merchants and party Bonzen (bigwigs) were shouting in unison, "Rot-Weiss-rot bis zum Tod," (Red-White-Red until Death). They were displaying in their lapels, the Krukenkreuz (symbol of the independent, rightist movement). The next day, when the Wehrmacht had rolled into Austria, so-called Ostmark, the same people of the previous day were proudly showing off the Hakenkrenz (swastika). The Catholic hierarchy, under the leadership of Cardinal Innitzer, intent on maintaining their sphere of influence, toadied to the new

precepts. Now, the masses were bellowing triumphantly, "Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer," (One People, one Empire, one Leader).

Hitler, the new saviour, had called the Austrians-Ostmärker *Schlappschwänze*, (limp-tails). The Ostmärker had to prove him wrong, that they were actually stiff-tails. During the war they continuously tried to prove their virility, by perpetrating the most atrocious acts, outdoing on many occasions, the original Aryans, the German Nazi thugs.

Bernhard-Harry Frisch was a young man of an old fashioned, formal upbringing, a product of his paternal home with traditional etiquettes of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Tact and tolerance toward your fellow man, love of culture, the emancipation of the human spirit were an intrinsic part of his personality. It was very hard for him to adjust to the violent ethics of an uncouth society. Equally, he found it difficult to shed his old world habits. Normally, even in the heat of summer, he would be impeccably attired, starched shirt, necktie, a hat, gloves and a walking cane would be parts of his regalia.

He loved literature, poetry and most of all, music. He had a lyrical tenor voice. At the Wiener Volksoper (Vienna People's Opera), he had sung lead roles in the operettas of Franz Lehár and Emmerich Kálmán. He met the composer Lehár at his Budapest villa who commiserated with him and promised to help in any way possible. Unfortunately, Lehár's intercession did not result in an improvement of Harry's precarious situation.

Harry discussed with me the necessity of emulating a hunted beast which is trying to evade predators. "One cannot expect consideration or pity. The hunters enjoy

the kill. They obliterate even when they don't have to." And thoughtfully, he added, "We have to be cunning, we have to be tenacious, and we have to resort to any ruse to survive." I did agree with him. Then looking at me pensively, he ventured, "Gyuri, has innate attributes to survive. He is charming, he is diplomatic, he is cheerful, resourceful, a good athlete and an excellent soccer player. Provided that luck will stay with him, he has an outstanding chance to last through the war." (At that time, we did not know that my cousin, Gyuri, with all his qualities, would lose his life in an Ukrainian minefield.)

Curious to hear his assessment anent to my chances for a continued existence, he had to be prodded to respond, "You will encounter many difficulties, for you are too straightforward and too trusting." And in an admonishing tone he avowed, "We are powerless, we cannot meet force with force. We must playact, we must be flexible, wait for redeeming opportunities and then react quickly and decisively." To me, this opinion sounded like a vague and philosophical thesis. Yet, I decided at a later occasion to put this theorem to the test.

Harry was drafted into a Hungarian forced labour battalion. In October 1944, Szálasi, the murderous, fascist Arrowcross party chieftain, was put by the Germans at the helm of the Hungarian government. He sped up the deportation of Jews to death camps. Harry's company was on a hunger march toward the Austrian border province of Burgenland. Some of his comrades could no longer endure the hardships of the road. They were famished, in pain and hobbled along until they collapsed. They were shot. The others were compelled to march on with songs croaking from their parched throats. The armed guards believed in the beneficial effect of marching choirs. Suddenly, the half-starved, bedraggled, staggering pariahs were surrounded by rifle toting Arrowcross hoodlums. They were drenched

with gasoline and set afire. The few, amongst them, who were attempting to flee, were mowed down by the fascist dregs. Dr Bernhard-Harry Frisch, a gentle and honourable, man was no more.

When I paid a visit to my mother's youngest sister, Mrs R., the wife of a respected surgeon, she was entertaining a well known, gentile actress, the patient of her husband. Mrs R., intent on enlivening their afternoon prattle, and spicing their chitchat, asked me to recount to them episodes of my KMSZ life. I was slightly taken aback by this cavalier approach of judging our travails as being an agreeable topic for idle chatter. I related some of our hardships, in a curt and factual manner, without enlarging upon the more distressing aspect of our daily lives. The ladies' expressions took on an air of incredulity, as I progressed with my reports. Their anticipatory smiles had disappeared and they commenced to nervously bite their lips. Apparently, I had committed a *faux pas* by talking of crass events which, in better society, are not to be broached.

I was in no mood to further contribute to a *kaffeeklatsch* and bid the ladies goodbye. Mrs R. scurried after me to the vestibule and remarked in a self-satisfied manner that, "I had made a very good impression on her guest, and she had reason to be proud of me." Now it was my turn to cast appraising and sceptical glances at her. Her comments were however sincere and unpretentious. It became clear to me that she, together with so many other Budapest Jewish people, lived in a cocoon of self-deception. They could not foresee the possibility of themselves becoming a persecuted and endangered species of men. In their minds, only the KMSZ labourers and those Jews who lived in the border areas were exposed to life-threatening situations.

Mrs R. felt furthermore secure in her social position. Her husband was a well liked physician. He was sought after, kind and a studious man who lived for his patients, family and hobbies. Mrs R. was a devoted wife and a doting mother of their bright, precious two and a half year old son, Tamás. Tamás was a blond, blue-eyed, cheerful little fellow. His uncle Harry had taught him some arias which Tamás, in his squeaky baby voice tried to hum. The little boy had not been circumcised. His parents had taken this decision hoping that this precaution would further reinforce their little son's Aryan appearance. Dr R. was a man reasonably content with his lot. Although he was fully aware of the hardships faced by the general Jewish population, he was convinced that with his connections to well placed people, he and his family might avoid being exposed to calamities. He had a well liked young wife and a little son who was the joy and centre of his life.

Dr R. also had hobbies, among one was ornithology. He had a small colony of budgies and watched over them carefully and rejoiced when with his help another member of the frolicking group saw daylight. These birds flew around freely in his study, and for some strange reason, be it by training or quirky coincidence, did not dive-bomb.

In the spring of 1944, Dr R. was drafted into a KMSZ battalion. At the beginning of his service, he was fortunate enough to be assigned to a provincial hospital. His wife, although not obliged to do so, gave up their Budapest apartment and together with her little son, joined her husband. The hospital was run by cloistered nuns. In June of that year, all Jewish people of that area were rounded up for deportation to a so-called work camp in Poland. Mrs R. asked the nuns to keep their child until her return. The family R. held fast to their belief that they were to be deported for a temporary stay. The nuns refused to take care of their child. The family arrived in

Auschwitz. During their freight train ride, Mrs R. suffered a fractured arm. At the mustering off assembly in Auschwitz, she could not hold up her little son. She asked a German SS guard to keep the child for a little while. He promised to return the child to her shortly. As she stepped forward, hiding her broken arm and facing Dr Mengele, she was motioned to the side of the workers. Mothers with babies in their arms were sent to the *Brausebäder* (showers), where they were gas poisoned. Mrs R. was sentenced to a life of perpetual suffering. Her husband was taken away. She never saw her son again. She survived the war, and lives in a hallucinatory world of metaphysical images, believing her beloved ones are still alive.

She travelled to many countries trying to find her Aryan-looking son. Perhaps he was adopted by German prison guards? At one time she conceived the idea of him being a hit parade vocalist whose voice she recognized in a Canadian radio recording studio. She thought that she was hard on his heels. At the radio station, she had to be restrained by the security guards. The next time she was convinced that her son had become a physician whom she tried to locate in Germany. On another occasion she travelled to Israel to find her Tamás. Again, in the U.S.A., her son, she professed had become a scientist who, together with his father, opened the apartment building where she lives. The paranoid impressions, experiments and tortures of Auschwitz are still with her. Hostile groups of Nazis and fascists are radiating mind controlling rays onto their perceived adversaries. She has to protect herself.

The *Dunapalota* (Danube Palace) hotel was one of the most elegant gathering places, located on the exclusive Danube promenade strip. During the festive season, the dance halls were jammed packed with diversion seeking civilians and

soldiers.

I figured that I should grant myself the liberty of partaking in an evening of entertainment reserved for the privileged. The Aryans did not have to know of my identity. I had come to the conclusion that the more brazen one acted, the better the chances were for success. So I dressed in my best suit, shirt and necktie and took the streetcar and arrived at the entrance to the hotel. I joined a throng of young people who swarmed eagerly to the gaily lit main hall from where the strains of gypsy music could be heard. At least one thousand people must have gathered who walked around with wine filled tumblers in their hands, sizing up the opposite sex.

The garland and streamer bedecked hall was permeated by the vapour and odour of alcohol and tobacco fumes. Gradually as more guests moved onto the dance floor, dining tables were pushed toward the walls to give more room for the crowd, who were stomping, heel-clicking and whirling around to the tunes of fiery *csárdás* music.

A good looking black-haired girl, slightly tipsy, provocatively swaying her svelte hips approached me and demanded to know, "Hey handsome fellow, were you waiting for me to dance with you?" Spontaneously, I asserted, "Most certainly, the whole evening I was looking for you." This reply seemed to please her and without any hesitation she put her arms around me, pressing her beguiling shape against my yielding body. I was quite content in having been chosen by this beauty.

The more we danced, the closer she snuggled up to me. Another orchestra started playing fox trots and tangos. The bright lights were dimmed. We had more wine

and danced without stopping. After awhile, it seemed that I had lost my ability to move my limbs independently of my partner who had become bodily attached to me. I could not discern any longer, was it for mutual attraction, or had it become a bacchanalian plot? She wanted to know, "Where did you pick up your deep dark tan?" I could not profess the truth. KMSZ men were not supposed to participate in such alcohol bibbing, purely Aryan amusements. I responded, "I just got back from a winter vacation in the Bükk mountains." She nodded approvingly. I did not believe that she would have objected had I told her of my real activities, which provided me with a bronzed complexion. Yet, I could not take any chances. Sometimes one had to prevaricate. She might be a fiendish fascist who would take pleasure in announcing my true identity to the festive multitude.

Around midnight, she grabbed my hand and in a sultry voice whispered, "Now, let's go to my place, I want to spend the night with you." I was thrilled by this proposition. Yet, the thought occurred to me that this lusty wench was a tad too Amazonian. We journeyed by streetcar to her parent's suburban home. On the way, she leaned her silken-haired head against my shoulder. Around her neck she wore a golden chain with a large cross-shaped pendant. To the good natured smiling passengers, we looked like a young love-entrapped Aryan couple.

She lived in an old fashioned cottage and we entered her chamber. From the adjoining bedroom the hoarse snoring of her father could be heard. She felt downcast. "My parents were supposed to be in the country." And regretfully she added, "I'm sorry my angel, I cannot let you spend the night in my bed. My father would shoot us both." And then, pulling my arms, she said, "Let's go to the back porch."

In the icy cold winter night, leaning against the doorframe, she fumbled with my pants, gathered up her dress and whispered in a husky searing voice, "Come on sweetie, let's do it." Fortunately, I had a few prophylactics with me. She would not let go until she felt satiated and exhausted. My head was spinning in a wine and pleasure induced rapture. I had not touched a female for more than one year.

My furlough had come to and end. I took leave of my relatives and said goodbye to my mother. We could not be sure whether we would see each other again.

Thirteen

In Hukliva, the situation had changed very little. The same work schedules, and the same feeling of futility prevailed. Without false identity papers, money and secured shelter, we could not make a run for it. We were surrounded by hostile people, at the hub of a fascist dominated central Europe. The only motivation in the struggle for survival was hope. Hope that the war would end soon, and hope that we would be lucky enough to pull through with our mental and physical strength intact.

Some of our fellows did not want to be sustained by hope alone. They wanted to improve their lot by immediately concocting hair-brained schemes. One of these chaps was the son of the Budapest chief cantor. His pride and sense of self-importance was hurt when he failed to receive a furlough. He bribed a Ukrainian and obtained identity papers and a peasant's garb. Thereupon, he borrowed the man's sleigh and horse and scurried down to the train station at Vóloc. He was determined to reach Budapest and with the help of his illustrious father, go into hiding. Somehow his strategy collapsed and he was never heard of again.

We also had to deal with the chicaneries of our pious patriarch, the father of the four maidens. He was utterly distressed upon hearing from us that we had failed to secure fake marriage certificates for his lovelies. He suspected that we really did not care for his brood and hatched plans for retribution. Our fellows had taken bundles of hay from his loft for their bed sites. He demanded an exorbitant price for this valuable commodity. Upon being paid an equitable recompense, he reported our fellows to our commander for thievery. He was hoping that punishment would be meted out against the perpetrators. Another time he colluded with our rabbi.

Food parcels were being sent to his address from the motherland. He demanded half the rations for his service, after all, he rendered a service in supervising that only kosher food was delivered. We refused to pay multiple tithes. Again, he went squealing on us, claiming receipt of unauthorized smuggled-in parcels at his quarters.

The Ukrainian gospel man of Vóloc was an even worse, pharisaic parasite. He had sent word that he would accept winter clothing to be delivered for us at his residence. Many valuable items were thus forwarded to him. A company of Wehrmacht soldiers were stationed at Vóloc. The officer corps were billeted in the shepherd's residence.

Our lads were burrowing land mine shafts underneath the main highway which was to be blown up. We were preparing the area to stem and repulse an anticipated Soviet attack. Most of our fellows had not been granted a furlough for over one year. Their clothing was in tatters. They toiled in biting cold weather. Their feet and hands were numb. The shepherd was holding on to our winter garb.

The lads, recognizing that the righteous man's lodging was guarded and occupied by German soldiers, asked me to attempt to enter the quarters and remonstrate with the saintly man to release our clothing. At the gate stood a rifle toting soldier. I saluted and explained that the priest had called for me to see him in an urgent matter. The soldier directed me toward the courtyard. A middle-aged officer, his hands folded behind his back, attired in an immaculately priggish uniform and wearing shiny black boots, was strutting about, absorbed in deep thoughts.

Upon perceiving me he came to an abrupt halt and in a harsh voice, tinged with astonishment, he bellowed, "What the hell are you doing here you damn swine?" And not waiting for my answer, for he assumed that I would not understand his German, he lifted his revolver from its holster. He thought that this gesture would be understood, even by a swine. I stopped, clicked my heels, saluted rigidly and responded in snappy German, "Herr Hauptmann (Captain), I report respectfully (a standard military address), that I have been told by the Herr parson to see him." The captain, actually, he was only a lieutenant, upon hearing my response in peerless German and the implied promotion of his rank, relented somewhat and bellowed, "You dirty louts are not supposed to enter these quarters. I'll give you five minutes to see the priest and then you'll clear out of here." Again I saluted firmly and hurried to search for the good shepherd.

Loud voices, laughter and besotted yodelling could be heard from the priest's dining room. He was entertaining his guests. His maid led me past a cloakroom. Its door was left ajar, revealing perhaps one hundred partially opened cardboard boxes consisting of clothes. Hanging on the walls were about fifty new winter coats.

Standing at the door of the guestroom, I motioned to the priest. He saw me and blanched. He rose from his table, wiped his mouth with a large white napkin, smiled, bowed to the officers and toddled toward me with a stern, reproachful expression on his pudgy face. "What are you doing here? What do you want?" I responded in a restrained manner, "Mr Parson, you have told us that we would get our clothing as soon as it arrived at your residence." His face became crimson red and he shrieked at me, "That's right and I have not received anything as yet! Why are you bothering me?" As calmly as I could, I responded, "Our fellows are freezing. Two months have passed since parcels were sent to you. I thought that I

had seen the clothing in your cloakroom." He seemed to become apoplectic as he was gasping for air, "Are you calling me a liar?" And not waiting for my answer, he admonished me, "Write your God damn people at home not to tell lies. They have not sent anything to me. Tell them to send clothing and I'll turn it over to you." In a cold measured voice, the sarcasm of my query escaping his notice, I demanded, "Do we have to pay you again for your good services?" Eagerly, he replied, "Yes, for each parcel, you louts will have to pay one month's worth of army pay."

I saw that I could not achieve anything with this saintly man. There was only one more thing left to endeavour, to appeal to the smidgen of compassion hiding in his righteous breast, "Mr Parson, we are willing to cooperate with you, but we need our clothing badly." He glared at me and repeated, "I have nothing for you and now get your hide out of here." With this, he turned his back on me and returned to the Wehrmacht officers with a broad and benign grin on his fat face. In the courtyard I met the officer strutting around on his constitutional rounds. I saluted him respectfully, whereupon he dignified me with the remark, "You seem to carry yourself like a soldier. It's a pity that you are not a gentile." This comment was the only positive, intangible accomplishment of my mission to the consecrated grounds.

The German officer cursed and shouted hoarsely, "Pick up the damned roll of barbed wire, put it on your shoulders and run up the hill. "For further emphasis he fired a volley of shots in front of our feet. These heavy stacks of rusty coils came in two sizes. The smaller, handy one weighed thirty killograms. The bulkier ones with more nails sticking out, came in fifty kilogramme bundles. The barbed wire was helixed around a heavy wooden log whose ends were left open for carrying purposes.

The hills were covered with a one metre deep freshly fallen soft snow. It would have taken a considerable effort to climb the slopes even without being encumbered by extra weight. For one man to put the smaller coil onto his shoulders and attempt to ascend through the mounds of snow, was equivalent to the efforts of an East Indian fakir who would grittily transcend the threshold of physical pain. The decision to climb up the elevations with the coil's rusty protuberances resting on your shoulders, entering your head with a rusty, thorn-spiked halo clawing bleeding wounds into your skull and neck was metaphorically analogous to a Golgothan trek to extinction.

A German army unit had taken charge of the fortification operations in this area. Our guards resented being ordered about by their Nazi allies. After all, our slave drivers had become accustomed to giving their own commands. The Germans had no regard for the sentiments of their Magyar surrogates. They were only concerned with action, results and had no tolerance for delays and excuses. They were the ultimate decision makers that military success depended upon.

The fifty kilogramme coils, which the Germans initially demanded to be lugged along by one KMSZ were finally hoisted and borne by two men. The slippery, icy trek was tortuous. We slid and fell in the snow as the rusty coils pierced our bodies. The barbed wire coils were to entangle the Russian enemy. The corroded spiked wire mesh did a good job ensnaring, spearing, serrating and bleeding us to ankylose exhaustion. The Germans would not countenance pity nor compassion, therefore, we had to carry on.

More than two thousand of these coils had to be strung along the fortified perimeters. Close to half of our company became ill. We had become inoperative

with multiple skin lacerations, high fever and blood poisoning. We did not receive any medical care. The only concession the Germans would make was to allow those who could not stand on their feet to stay in their quarters for two to three days. A semi-miracle seemed to unfold itself. Our *soldateska* hated the arrogant, disdainful German soldiers. They were indignant of their Teutonic master's tutelage. Our guards wanted to terminate this work assignment speedily. They climbed the hills with us while spurning us on, "Boys, let's finish this bloody job. These Germans are no human beings, they are animals!" We did not ask whether our German guards belonged to a different species of the animal kingdom than them.

Our own animals, our guards, helped us. When they were outside the visual periphery of their German bothers-in-arms, they would grab the rusty barbed wire coils, shoulder and carry them. Then they would say, "Boys, all we have to do is to move the stacks from the base camp. When the Germans won't see us, we'll drop the coils into the snow ravines on our way up the hills." Luckily, the Wehrmacht soldiers did not follow uphill. A good one-third of the to be transported coils were thus jettisoned a long distance before their destination. The unbelievable had happened, our guards colluded with us in committing sabotage. After having placed the coils, each bundle was connected and in this manner the barrier was completed. The Nazis, however having observed the occasional helping hand of our guards called them derisively, *Juden-liebhaber*, which when translated meant, "Jew-lovers." Our guards were obviously chagrined by such demeaning epithet and averred hotly, "Hey you guys, you know that this is a bloody lie. We like to stick it to you in many different ways, but not as your lovers!" We did not feel like soothing the bruised egos of our own miscreant animals. We completed the barbed wire assignment after one month.

We hacked away at the stone hard, frozen ground. The soil did not yield to the blows of our pick axes or to the prying strikes of heavy, wedge-topped iron ramrods. The terrain was frozen to a depth of one metre. We were to excavate machine gun positions along the principal highway. Ultimately, we called for Acél and his helpers to crack open the soil with their thirty kilogramme sledgehammers. The stony ground spew sparks as it was belaboured by merciless pounding. At a depth of one quarter metre, we encountered layers of basalt. Manual efforts of digging deeper had failed. Acél called for dynamite charges to be laid. He and his gang had succeeded after strenuous exertions to enlarge small holes in the layers of rock by hammering the wedge iron into the fissures.

The Germans refused to release dynamite sticks to their Hungarian allies. They had no faith in the efficacy of our guards' labours. The resentment of our staff mounted toward the Germans for being treated as inferiors. There were continuous mumbled allusions to get even with the arrogant Germans. After one month we had dug more than one hundred machine gun bivouacs.

One night, while a howling blizzard rattled the rotting wooden planks of our hay loft shelters, we heard the crackle of repeated gunfire. We thought that soldiers were firing at looters. In the morning, we were told that partisans had ambushed three German food supply lorries and Wehrmacht occupants were killed. German and Hungarian army commanders imposed a curfew upon the entire area. A thorough dragnet for the killers was laid. Ukrainian peasants were grilled at length for clues to the murders. The investigators drew a blank. Our guards were gloating and nodding with an air of concealed knowledge. They would hint to us, "Now, these snooty Germans got their comeuppance." We did not pump our guards for additional information. We were convinced that they had a hand in the murders.

Our company commander, Ensign Kántor, had been reprimanded by his peers on many occasions. They maintained that he was too accommodating and forgiving with us. This time, the officer corps had stiffened their demands. He would have to set higher work quotas, disallow claims by sick labourers for exemption from service or, he Kántor, would have to appear before a disciplinary board of enquiry, facing charges of dereliction of duty.

Kántor was a proud man. He had spent close to twenty years in military service. Most of this time as a French Foreign Legionnaire. A short while ago, his reminiscences of that long period in his life were published under the title, "A Hero's Death for France."

Liberal minded officers looked kindly upon his past and supported his application for a promotion based on seniority. Others who accused Kántor of a lack of fascist fervour, tried to undermine his position and were intent on achieving his demotion to the ranks of a common soldier. Kántor was in a quandary. He disliked the fascists and had made many efforts to alleviate our plight. For this, he was pilloried by his peers. Now, he had to make a choice between us and his career.

Toward the end of March 1944, large Hungarian reinforcements were sent to the frontline. Many artillery pieces, cannons, howitzers and flaks were transported by motorized conveyances and horse teams across our mountain pass into Poland.

An exceedingly heavy snowfall, which turned into a blinding blizzard sleet storm made the ascent to the summit of the crossing impeditive. Several large, horse-drawn cannons had slipped off the ice-covered narrow tracks, blocked the route and

lodged themselves in huge snow drifts.

Our company received an order to immediately rush to the aid of the incapacitated draught animals and to clear the roads of the obstructing artillery pieces. When we arrived, the horses had been unharnessed and whipped in vain to greater efforts. Rivulets of blood were flowing down their hides. Cannons, sliding downhill, jerked the animals sideways, and rolled over their bodies. A number of these draught horses were whinnying in terror, sensing death as their spilled out guts coloured the snow purple red.

Kántor was transformed into the semblance of a delirious madman. He conveyed the impression of a desert warrior running amuck, intent on disembowelling his adversaries. He was screaming at the top of his voice, gesticulating wildly with his arms and swinging cement blocks at us which he had taken from the carriages and blustering while foamy spittle ran from his mouth, "You dirty Jews, what are you standing around for? Will you let all the horses get killed?"

We looked at each other in utter amazement. This man, to all appearances, had become insane. He yelled, "Get hold of those yokes, harnesses and ropes. String them around your necks and shoulders. Move the cannons, get to it, heave ho, heave ho, heave ho Jews!"

The German and Hungarian officers smiled approvingly as Kántor continued with his berserk exhortations. A German officer watching our teams of thirty men pulling the cannons out from the snow mounds demanded to know, "Say, Ensign Kántor, is this the way the French Foreign Legion made subordinates work?" Our seemingly deranged company commander replied, "Worse than this lieutenant, worse than

this.” And now, he got hold of a horsewhip and belaboured our backs with its thongs.

After five hours, we had freed all heavy armoured equipment and pulled them across the mountain pass. There, the remaining horses were once again shackled to their harnesses. They were entrusted to guide the artillery pieces on their descent safely into Poland. In the evening at roll call, when no other officers were around, Ensign Kántor confided to us, “Boys, I did not enjoy driving you like animals, but I had to make a show of it.”

A few days later we were given new marching orders. We were not sure whether this was due to Kántor’s new-found image or the complots of his foes. All that we learnt was that our new assignment called for action closer to the battle lines.

In early April, 1944, during a premature thaw in the weather, we received our army pay in Zlotys, the Polish currency. We shouldered our gears, marched out of Hukliva, crossed the mountain pass and arrived in our first Polish stopover, the village of Odhporzecz.

Fourteen

A small cluster of peasants had gathered in front of the hamlet's sole, wooden ramshackle convenience store. We were allowed, at this most welcome outpost of civilization, to put our Zlotys to good use by purchasing razor blades, soap and tooth powder.

The rustics looked at us with furtive and malicious expressions on their puffy, sullen faces. We were taken aback by their hateful attitude, which became clearer to us when we overheard them muttering, "Now, these Jews have come to join the others who are buried underneath those hills." One of our fellows, who was fully conversant with their Ukrainian idiom, questioned them, "Say brave lumbermen, what do you mean by 'join the others?'" They, the brave ones, shuffled around uncomfortably, hemming and hawing and finally spit out these odious words, "You guys won't last for long here. They only brought you here to be murdered by the fascist Bandeira gangs." We had heard of these paramilitary Ukrainian units, allied with the Wehrmacht, whose professed aim was to establish an independent Ukraine, free from the shackles of the Soviets. They, the Bandereistas had to prove their loyalty to Nazi ideology by being more vicious than their masters in eliminating the alleged enemies of The Reich.

The spokesman of the loggers, with a malevolent smirk on his face added, "Join us in the forests to fight the Nazis and Bandereistas. At least you'll kill some of them." We asked them if we could trust their sincerity. "Of course, we are devout Christians. We would not betray you." The peasant pointed in a northerly direction, "Do you see those hills near Lavocsne? It is there that your brethren from the

surroundings and as far away as Kolomea and Tarnopol were brought to. They were clubbed, shot and buried in those hills, it is there where you are going to end up if you don't join us as partisans." Our comrade responded, "We are not going to be slaughtered like sheep, we are going to kill and bury them ourselves." This opinion was proclaimed with a flourish of bravado. We were watching for the peasant's reaction. They displayed smug satisfaction. They were convinced that we trusted them implicitly.

We mentioned that we had no weapons to fight the Nazis with. They assured us that we would be given rifles once we joined their ranks in the forests. We were given one day to mull over their altruistic proposition.

After midnight, hooded and armed men burst into one of our shelters. They seized all sanitary supplies and abducted our medic. At dawn, we heard the echoes of rapid gunfire. A small convoy of Wehrmacht motor vehicles had been attacked. The Germans were trapped in a narrow mountain gorge. They fought back with machine guns and hand grenades. They put the partisans to flight. One Wehrmacht officer had been mortally wounded. Other injured soldiers were hurriedly carried away on stretchers.

An immediate alarm was sounded by German and Hungarian army units. We were rushed out of bivouacs for a hasty roll call. All men were accounted for as no one had taken part in the ambush. The villagers were rounded up and grilled at length to disclose the identity of the attackers. Women and children were horsewhipped and their menfolk were bludgeoned with rifle butts. The culprits were not found. The Wehrmacht decided to exact immediate retribution.

Peasants were chosen at random and strung upside down on tree limbs. They were dangling and swinging to and fro on the tree branches whilst the soldiers were belabouring their heads with their hobnailed boots. The truth about the attackers had to be obtained by any means. The villagers could not help the Wehrmacht, they simply did not know the identity of the partisans who must have been from other villages.

The Germans would not be assuaged, nor did they relent. Their commanding officer, a young lieutenant was convinced of collusion by the peasants. He gave them one more opportunity to confess or they would regret their silence. They cried out in agony that they would cooperate if they only knew of the offenders. The officer did not believe them. He lost his patience and barked an order to his men to unsheathe their bayonets. He would show this rabble the dire consequences of their conspiracy with the partisans.

With their bayonets the soldiers proceeded to peel off flesh from the fingers of their victims. The German officer laughed hysterically, "We'll sharpen your fingers until the bones will look like pencils unless you'll spit out the truth. Out with the truth, you stinking animals." The peasants squirmed and writhed in their death throws. Their blood coloured the ground. They moaned in pain and then fainted. The officer snarled like a rabid dog.

The remainder of the habitants were herded together and with whips cracking on their backs were driven out of their village. Their huts were set afire, their cattle was loaded onto a Wehrmacht truck and the conquering army moved out of the hamlet braying the words of one of their favourite songs, *Wir werden wetermarschieren, wenn alles in Scherben zerfällt, denn heute gehört uns*

Deutschland und morgen die ganze Welt. (We will march on whether everything breaks into shards, for today ours is Germany, and tomorrow the whole world.)

On the outskirts of Lavocsne we saw gutted cottages and remnants of recently torched dwellings. We searched through the burnt ruins for signs of former Jewish presence. Mezuzahs, cigar sized, cylindrical metal containers enwrapping the Ten Commandments were still attached to charred doorframes. Tattered prayer shawls and books were strewn around the grounds. All signs pointed to the recent extinction of Jewish life.

We continued our march in a northerly direction. In the afternoon we arrived at a roadside clearing where we noticed huge mounds of live ammunition shells. We were ordered to relocate the explosives to nearby wooden sheds that weighed from twenty-five to seventy-five killogramme. It was a delicate undertaking stockpiling the shells with their grimy, slippery exterior. The smaller loads were carried by one person who had to take utmost care to not lose his grip while balancing the bomb on his shoulder. The heavier shells were carried by two men straining to hold on to the two ends of the greasy projectiles. After a few hours of back-wrenching toil we had succeeded, without suffering casualties to relocate the dangerous cargo into the new shelter.

We spent the night on the fringes of a dense forest surrounding the town of Škole. The next morning we were assigned work in a logging camp and adjacent sawmill. Our co-workers were Polish peasants. They treated us with an uncalled for air of condescension. Apparently, they had never anticipated to meet our kind. Not until we had spent a few hours acquiring the skills of their trade and out-performing their work efforts, would they cease to relinquish their superior attitude.

We handled the iron tipped long wooden shafts, called zapinas to roll and heave cumbersome logs into piles with dexterity. And then, finally, we were honoured to be addressed by the upright peasants with a benevolent admonition, "We are working in this camp only during the day, at night we are in the woods, waiting to kill Nazi soldiers. Come and join us and we'll help you." We had heard this song before.

The Germans were still looking for the partisans who had attacked their transport a few days ago. In the afternoon of the next day, the villagers had washed themselves clean, so they thought, of all suspicions of culpability in the atrocities. In an oxcart were five hog-tied badly pummelled and mauled prisoners. The brave peasants, with triumphant shouts of hurray, had apprehended the vile attackers of German troops and were herding them toward their Nazi masters. The prisoners were to be interrogated by the Germans as to their *modus operandi*, the disclosure of their hideouts and the identity of the conspirators.

The Germans were smarter than the peasants expected them to be. They did not fall for the ruse of the villagers. Guilefully, creating a sense of gullibility on their part, they professed to accept the peasant's version of the crime. The Nazis were intent on exploiting the over confidence of their collaborators by waiting for their blundering self-incrimination. It was proclaimed that the prisoners would be sent to battalion headquarters pending their swift execution. The Germans knew that the captives could not have committed the assault, they were unarmed Jewish KMSZ labourers.

We stayed at the logging camp and sawmill for two weeks. During this time we aided in the production of construction lumber, producing boards and beams for the

army's engineering corps. This morning we shouldered our gear and took to the road. Our new assignment called for undisclosed work around an important defence line circling the town of Stryj. We left the forest behind us and marched on a dusty gravel path towards a verdant lowland. A seemingly endless convoy of horse-drawn army wagons, piled high with lumber, passed us by. They were all heading toward Stryj.

At noon we halted in our march to eat. The field canteen was tarrying. We waited for over one hour. Suddenly a horseback soldier arrived and breathlessly reported that our field kitchen and its guards had been attacked by partisans and taken prisoner. This presaged a starvation diet for the next few days. We would have to survive on a few accumulated breadcrumbs, or the spare apples hanging on roadside trees.

We stopped at a few hamlets hoping to buy or barter for bread or cheese from the Polish peasants. Knowing of their grasping and malevolent nature, we had little faith in their cooperation. We were not to be proven wrong. They refused to accept Zlotys or clothing and laughed in our faces derisively, "You should've stayed home and sucked your mother's tits rather than asking us for food." We responded in kind, while our guards prevented us from attacking these vile peasants.

Around eight o'clock in the evening, we passed by a well manicured large estate which surrounded an impressive baroque mansion. We were marched onto the grounds and directed toward the stables and pigsties. They were void of animals, thus we could move into our new abodes. At ten o'clock, we were lined up for our first meal. It proved to be another disappointment for we received only a tasteless coffee surrogate brew. By midnight we were snugly ensconced in our animal

shelters, where only the snoring of exhausted men and the rumbling and growling of abused, dyspeptic stomachs disrupted the quiet.

But hark! Can it be true? The melodious pianoforte sounds of a clavier and an accompanying velvety baritone voice combined in wafting mellow sonatas and Schubert Lieder through the night. We sat up in our hovels. Who could be the owner of this soul-stirring voice, singing *Am Brunnen vor dem Tore*, (at the well, near the gate) *Die Forelle* (the trout) *Röslein, Röslein, Röslein rot*, (little Rose, Rose, Rose red) and finally *Leise flehen meine Lieder*, (Softly, my songs are imploring...). At five o'clock in the morning, we were to find out.

We were ordered to line up for breakfast. The watered down remnants of last night's coffee imitation was poured into our canteen cups. This was the only nourishment to keep us going for the third day and therefore, not very encouraging. A few of our men noticed white Linden (lime) trees forming a promenade way to the mansion. They were attracted by the scent of juicy leaves and the fragrance of the white flowers embellishing the arbors. A few of our half-starved men had climbed the trees to gorge on these delicacies.

The main door of the chateau was opened abruptly and the performer of the nocturnal concert stormed out. A spiffily uniformed, blond thirtyish SS officer, a Hauptsturmführer (captain) at that, and this time his voice had changed to a husky bellow, as he slapped his bullwhip against his knee-high shiny boots. "You God-forsaken animals, scums of creation, get down this moment from those precious trees." The fellows were hesitant in plopping down from the trees for at this instant a huge, black Doberman pinscher was barking in a loud short yapping fashion with foam dripping from his large unmuzzled mouth. He followed his master and showed

his resolute intention of taking a bite out of our fellows.

Herr Hauptsturmführer, apparently for further emphasis, and not wanting to be upstaged by his canine, pulled a revolver from its holster and now in a stentorian, fortissimo voice hollered, "Off the trees you bloody rats, I'll teach you for damaging these wonderful trees, eating their leaves and preventing their pollination."

Our fellows followed his order. The moment they landed on the ground the dog saw his time had come. He attacked and dug his fangs into the buttocks of one of our men. This upset the Herr Hauptsturmführer to no end, "Oh my God, here, come here Wotan, poor loyal dog." The dog trotted up to his master who stroked his shiny fur tenderly, "Poor friend, you have bitten one of these infected rats. God knows what kind of sickness this lousy beast has transmitted to you." He grabbed his dog's leash and our perturbed SS officer in a sudden frenzy slashed the backs of our men with his bullwhip. He wiped pearls of sweat from his jowls and yowled, "If I catch you animals once more jawing on the trees, I'll whip you to death."

With this promise he retired hurriedly to the chateau mumbling in a hoarse voice "Wotan, I'll take you to a vet for some shots. I hope you didn't get rabies." We did not know that men could give distemper to animals. A half hour later, our officer having returned to his trusted clavier and apparently recuperated sufficiently from the worries about the trees and the pangs of alarm for his dog, started to play again, ever so softly, *Leise flehen meine Lieder*.

A little later, we lined up in front of the baronial mansion for another roll call. This chateau had been abandoned by its Polish nobleman owner who had joined the Polish Army fighting the Nazis. His possessions were confiscated and his property

had been taken over by a horde of SS officers.

Again, we were hoping to receive food rations, but none were given. On the other hand, our staff enunciated the importance of our new assignment and the pride we should take in the value of our contribution in helping to build a tank bridge across the wild uncontrollable waves of the river Stryj.

At noontime we caught our first glimpse of the river. It cut through a depression in the lowlands with a roaring, reverberating sound as if to warn that it carried the unpredictable force of a mountain stream. It's swooshing green waters tumbling into foaming one metre high white crests rushed to join its mightier mate, the Dniester.

The Germans had decided to shorten their supply lines by building a massive wooden bridge across the Stryj, thus connecting eastern Poland, north of the Beskides range, with the western Ukraine. Ours became the glorious task to help in this endeavour. A detachment of Hungarian Army engineers, together with their bridge building units, were feverishly engaged in constructing and assembling cofferdams and caissons. On the shores of this three hundred meter wide river were scores of heavy lumber, beams, boards and planks, all ferried or shuttled overland from the logging camp we had laboured at. A total of 2,000 KMSZ men and five hundred Hungarian bridge builders were supervised by an elite unit of SS field engineers.

Yellowish green scrubland, interspersed by thistly brushes adorned with prickly purplish flowers bordered a swath of clay and gravel pits skirting the unruly river. These manifestations of nature, with the exception of the colourful flora became

elements of our activities. In the middle of the river were long flat-bottomed pontoon boats which were anchored down at equal distances from each other and secured to their points of operation by heavy steel mesh cables which in turn were attached on land to buoy-like cement structures.

The pontoniers operated generators which powered pile drivers punching long iron girders into the river bed. The sounds of metallic clanging, the banging of heavy axes, the rhythmic thump of weighty hammers striking bulky nails and studs into yielding lumber created a constant jarring and pounding sound. On shore the soldiers and bridge builders continued to form cofferdams and caissons which varied in height from ten to sixty metres.

Cofferdams, square, open-ended wooden cabinets were iron clamped and strapped together in groups of four. These were the shorter structures, placed in order of ascending height into the river. Our task in this particular operation was to excavate sufficient quantities of wet, muddy clay from the shoreline and tightly seal all openings between the joined woodwork. It was a relatively undemanding yet miry chore which in some abstract manner gave us the illusion of being some quirky sculptors. The cofferdams, after having been sealed and waterproofed with tar, were laid out for drying on the gravelly shoreline.

The caissons were bulkier, longer variations of the cofferdams, and represented the main pillars for the tank bridge under construction. At this stage, we had very little to contribute in the construction or erection of the caissons. Our main task was to prepare access roads to the river and in helping to secure the cofferdams to the river bed which depended more on manual labour.

We were engaged in dislodging large rocks embedded on the shoreline. Acél, with his gang of stone hewers, fifty men in all, were called into action and with their sledgehammers cracked the boulders into smaller shapes usable for filling up the wooden columnar bridge supports. The remainder of our labour company levelled and firmed the access roads with fist sized rocks and splattered the gaps in the surface with gravel.

In the afternoon, we were formed into groups of four men and assigned to a land excavation pit. Each unit was equipped with one heavy iron pry bar, pick axe, spades and wheelbarrow. Our groups were to work at top speed by digging and mining for rocks, gravel, clay and sand. During the next few days, we were to produce, in separate mounds, cubic metres of these construction materials which, at the sound of a whistle command, had to be wheelbarrowed and trotted to the construction site.

Around five o'clock in the afternoon, we were told that the bridge would have to be built and finished within four days. Our company would be on the job without cessation, except for an alternating spell of four hours sleep for half of our outfit. No mention was made of the prospect for our first meal after three days.

Our guards, irked by the constant surveillance of the SS, were driven to lambasting our sapped work output, thereby trying to shore up their own poor image in the eyes of the chosen members of the *Herrenrasse*.

At seven o'clock in the evening, close to Vesperhour, our Hungarian army engineers, after a hard day's work, were eating their supper with deserved gusto. They ladled down abundant portions of good Hungarian beef gulyás with black peasant's bread.

We were also served supper, this time we received a double portion of our due, the well-known watery, unsweetened brew of coffee substitute. The army engineers observed us with puzzlement in their eyes, which seemed to say, "How in dickens can these fellows move at all with this piss of black water for food?!"

A black-haired mustached tawny giant of a man, almost two metres in height, a sergeant of the Hungarian bridge building unit, still munching on a piece of black bread, swaggered over to our lines. Mockingly, he pointed an index finger of a brawny arm at us while asking jeeringly, "Hey you Jews, what keeps you on your feet? What keeps you from dropping dead? No food and you are still squirming?" No one answered. What was there to say? Sulkily, we drank our lousy brew. "Here's another animal," we thought, "who wants to prick our arses." The sergeant, a proud warrior did not like to be ignored, so he continued still waiting for some kind of response. "Is it perhaps the love for your mommas, that keeps you going, or is it the fat arses of your big-nosed girlfriends back home that makes you want to survive?" This dog of a sergeant was really getting under our skin. Still, we did not reply to his foul-mouthing.

Then he continued, he had not finished delivering all his hateful monologue, "Hey you Jews, I know that you are all cowards and good-for-nothings. I'm sure it's your Bible that keeps you going, but here there are no bibles, here there is only work. Work to be done for our victory."

He looked at us with an air of contempt for no one had yet spoken against him. We did not want to be suckered in by his flouting remarks and our stubborn silence seemed to annoy him exceedingly. He shouted out to us, "Hey you Jews, show me that you can work, work like a normal human being, like us gentiles, like us

Hungarians." We looked at each other with an expression as if to say "here's another of these ill-begotten animals who thinks that he is the best God could have created."

We did not have to wait long to find out what this hero had on his mind. He looked at us with a smirk on his face, grudgingly to be admitted a handsome, masculine face and threw out the challenge, "Is there one Jew amongst you who is willing to stand up for a test of strength?" And as an afterthought, he chortled, "You know, like David and Goliath? Eh?" Apparently this dog did not know that we had not eaten for three days. However this challenge was too much for Acél. After all, he was our deputy company commander, a shirker by no means and he could no longer sit still listening to all the dung spouting from the sergeant's foul mouth. Acél stood up, clicked his heels in the prescribed military manner, his demeanour showing proud self-assurance and said, "Mr Sergeant, I beg to differ, we are not cowards, nor are we good-for-nothings. We are just as good as any of your soldiers. We are Jews, but we are also Hungarians, treat us as such!" Acél did not give a damn and there was sudden respect in the sergeant's eyes. "Ah, here's a Jew who has the guts to speak up. What's your name and who the hell are you?"

"Mr Sergeant, I report respectfully, my name is Acél, I am the Jewish deputy commander of this company." The sergeant, in an unexpected way, seemed to take a liking to Acél. "Acél, is there anything else you want to tell me?" "Yes Mr Sergeant. If we could have only half as much food as your soldiers, we could work as hard as them." The sergeant waved an admonishing finger at Acél, "Big words from a big fellow, Acél." "Tell me, what were you back home? A politician, a carnival crier, or, what the hell were you?" Mr. Sergeant, back home I was only a simple farmer's boy from the Bácska (a region south of Hungary, bordering

Yugoslavia).” And with a faint smile on his face he added, “I didn’t ask to be born a Jew.” The sergeant slapped Acél’s shoulder, “That’s enough Acél, let’s stop all the crap and let’s see what you can do.”

The sergeant pointed to a pile of gravel cement bags, each weighing fifty kilogrammes, “I’ll bet there is no Jew amongst you who could carry two bags of cement, that is one hundred kilogrammes, for fifty metres without tripping over his own stinking, flat feet.” Ten hands went up. None of us considered ourselves though as ‘stinking and flatfooted.’ I was one of the volunteers. The sergeant snickered, “I’ll bet all of you will have your pants full of you know what!”

We lined up. Our comrades helped in putting one bag on each side of our shoulders. We burrowed our fingers into the bags and with unsteady, yet determined steps, set off. The sergeant, with a tone of disbelief creeping into his voice yelled, “Run” and we ran even more determined than before to get to the finishing line. All of us got there without dropping any of those damn bags. We looked at the sergeant with a mild expression of triumph to which he responded with a snicker and the snide comment, “Well, this wasn’t actually that hard to do, but I am sure you’ve tried hard to prove me wrong.”

Now, he raised his ante, “Three bags, three bags, Jews! Who has enough blood in his prick to do it?” This time there were only five to take up the cudgels. The valiant soldiers did not expect any of these wretched, starved yet proud young men to have the inner fortitude to meet this last challenge. He thought that those five candidates were too presumptuous and attempted to mock him. “If anybody drops just one sack of cement, I’ll make him sorry for making fun of this contest.” He was a colossus of a man and probably tipped the scales at one hundred twenty

kilogrammes. He must have been aware that it was no mean effort attempting to run with one hundred fifty kilogrammes on your shoulders. It was better to withdraw ashamed than trying to disprove his opinion that we could not cut it. But he, the valiant, would have nothing of it. "You raised your hands, you are stuck with it!" he guffawed.

Our guards and company commander just stood by gawking and were mildly encouraging us for, after all, we were their charges. The sergeant made one allowance, he cut the length of the course by half. I was wondering whether it had not been a hasty decision on my part to volunteer for this last challenge. True I had never carried such a load on my shoulders. Granted that a few years ago, back in Budapest working as a factory hand, I had unloaded South American cork tree bark bales weighing one hundred thirty kilogrammes from railway cars and carried them on my back. I also should have taken into consideration my weakened physical strength due to the starvation diet of the last few days. But, apparent, the challenge to our manhood was too much to accept without a strenuous effort.

So, we lined up. Our comrades put one sack on each of our shoulders and the third across our nape, thus weighing down and holding the burden in place. My breathing became laboured and I felt a prickly heat creep up my body and pearls of sweat coiling down my face as I strained to balance the load firmly on my shoulders. The signal was given and I tottered, yet held on to the cursed bags desperately. I almost lost my balance when I stepped on a small rock. Only the encouraging cries of my friends, "Hold on Matyi, get on with it," prevented me from dropping the weight. With my mouth wide open, gasping for air, the blood throbbing audibly in my temples, I had somehow made it. At the finish line I sank to my knees and felt dizziness getting the better of me.

The sergeant called out to me, "Hi Matyi, is that your name, are you sure that you are Jewish?" The utter stupidity of his prejudice made me gnash my teeth as I replied haughtily, "That's what they say about me. I don't see that it should make any difference." "All right, all right," he replied, "don't be so Goddamn touchy and get your butt back into the lineup." As I limped past him he looked me over from head to toe and said, shaking his head, "You are a stocky little fellow, but I must say, you are a tough little lad. I wish that all your friends would be like you." This was an unexpected accolade.

Then he threw out another challenge. "Hey you guys, who's ready to shoulder four bags?" This time there were no takers. No one felt capable of doing this except for Acél. He looked the sergeant straight into his eyes, frowned and a sarcastic smile gradually covered his face. The sergeant was annoyed. "Hey Acél, you big fellow, what are you sneering about? Is two hundred kilogrammes not enough for you?" And Acél stood up challenging the sergeant, "Mr Sergeant, if you are willing to carry five bags, I'll do it as well." Momentarily, the sergeant, Mr Valiant was taken aback. He did not expect this bold dare.

"All right Acél, let's see if you are as big as your mouth is." With this, the sergeant ordered two of the bridge builders to load him up with five bags weighing two hundred fifty kilogrammes. His wide shoulders, muscular neck and brawny arms handled the tremendous weight well. He braced himself, feet wide apart as he jiggled the load on his shoulders. He was squinting over to Acél. Acél was one of the few, together with the company's scribe and cook, who had received the same food rations as the staff. He was not famished like the rest of us. His strength had not been sapped. He stood there proud and erect. We did not know where his confidence came from

The fellows loaded him up. He did not sway under the weight, he stood still, waiting for the go-ahead signal. The sergeant started out first, he gained two, then three steps on Acél. Then, the soldier's knees became soft, his legs bent to the sides awkwardly, his ankles buckled and he crashed to the ground. Acél, holding onto the bags, looking straight ahead to the finish line, continued. Slowly, with deliberate steps, putting down one foot after the other as if he wanted to stomp holes into the ground, reached the end of the line. There he did not throw off the weight, nay, he turned back, still carrying the bags. This was not demanded of him. He tried to do double the distance.

The soldiers looked in stunned silence at their husky superior. Acél was still carrying the weight when he reached the sergeant who, in a kneeling position, tried to get to his feet. Then Acél threw the bags off his shoulders, held out a hand to the soldier who accepted Acél's help in getting up. "Well done, Acél," and he put an arm around our comrade's shoulder. Then he turned toward us, motioning at the group who had taken part in his contest, saying, "You guys can be proud of them."

The sergeant hobbled over to his commanding officer, a young lieutenant and discussed something quietly. Then the sergeant came back to our group and said, "You guys can thank your fellows for something I've arranged for you." We had no clue what the hell he was referring to. But he spurted it out right away, "Our canteen will let you have the remainder of our supper, bread and gulyás, enough to feed you all." We thought that these were the words of the Messiah. Nay, it was the words of this fellow, who just a short while ago was belittling us and had called us all sorts of names. Now, he said "As long as you're working with us, I'll see to it that you'll get enough grub." We had difficulty believing our ears. But it was true.

The bridge builders, hefty chaps they were, lifted Acél onto their shoulders, and continued yelling, "Bravo, bravo, Acél." And now the sergeant added his opinion to all the cheering, "You guys are all Hungarians and I wish you could wear a proud Hungarian valiant soldier's uniform." This was quite a mouthful, considering that we were surrounded by our hateful, ignorant guards and misgiving SS soldiers. The sergeant was not a timid fellow.

Work now started in earnest. We had our grub and there were no more excuses for not working hard like the Hungarians.

The first set of cofferdams was moved into the river. At a depth of one metre, some of our fellows had to dip down into the water and remove by hand, or with pick axe, boulders and rocks which were impeding the settling of the structures on level ground. Fighting the currents was a strenuous undertaking. However, the job was accomplished without too much difficulty. The problems became more demanding when we had to place the cofferdams in two metres of water. The flow of the stream was heavier as the swift eddies pulled our fellows away from the cofferdams. It became exceedingly difficult to accomplish our task. The sergeant in charge of the construction, gave orders to have ropes tied around the midribs of our men who were fighting the currents, so as not to be swept away.

One of our men was toiling under water when he did not respond to the pull of the rope. He did not emerge. His foot was caught under a cofferdam. Two engineers dove into the water and freed our comrade by inching the cofferdam away from his foot. They brought our comrade to the surface but by then he had drowned.

The engineers and bridge building detachments had secured the exact positioning of the initial cofferdams in the river. They placed heavy lumber and crossbeams over the wooden enclosures. Now it was our turn to wheelbarrow heavy rocks and small boulders which demanded the pushing of cart loads by two men. The engineers were busy pumping water out of the cofferdams while we were rushing, building and filling material on gangplanks to the cofferdams. We alternately poured rocks, cement, boulders and gravel alternately into the apertures of the wooden cabinet pillars. Our guards exhorted us to run up the gangplanks with our load, return to our digging pits just as hurriedly, for the deadline of a four-day construction objective had to be met.

At dusk, countless empty oil barrels were strategically placed and a fire was lit in them. Thus an eerie glow shed light over the construction site. Fires were burning on land and illuminating the access to the tank bridge. Around midnight, one of our fellows, pushing a heavy wheelbarrow load of rocks, careened off the bridge and into the river. He yelled and screamed while attempting to hold onto the upturned cart which the river had mercilessly taken hold of. He tried to grab the handles of the cart but he submerged and was washed away, never to be seen again.

The sergeant was upset. "I won't tolerate any further casualties while I'm in charge of the work gangs." The SS demanded that we place cofferdams to a depth of three metres and prepare the ground by diving into the water. The sergeant would have none of this. He told his superior, the young lieutenant, "Tell the SS to go to hell. I won't have any of my KMSZ guys sacrificed for their pleasure." The lieutenant could not convey this message literally. However, the sergeant had accomplished that from hereon in, iron girders would be pile-driven into cofferdams to secure positioning, starting from a depth of three metres. This sergeant had become our

benefactor.

We toiled on through the night. Half of our company got a four-hour sleep break. Work continued without cessation. On the other side of the river, so we were told, a battalion of KMSZ men under the direction of field engineers and bridge builders had commenced work to finish half of their bridge part.

We carried on working, close to exhaustion during four nights and four and a half days. We no longer received the rich cuisine of the engineers. On the second day of our torment a new field kitchen had arrived. We were fed, day in, day out cabbage and potatoes. We felt like mashed vegetables.

The fifth day had arrived and the bridge was complete. We were a half day late. The SS did not like it and blamed us for the delay. The Hungarian bridge builders banded around us. "The fellows may be Jews, but they have done a fine job. Better than you SS guys." The SS saw red and were not accustomed to being defied. The young lieutenant became vehement as he cried out to the SS, "These guys are Hungarian workers. They have done a good job and I won't let them be abused." Our company commander, Kántor, smiled in agreement. The SS were astonished with this confluence of Hungarian brotherhood and slunk away.

The first motorbikes and lorries had crossed the bridge from the west. A loud "Hurray" went up. The sergeant and the young lieutenant bid our commander and staff goodbye. They lined up and more than two hundred Hungarian engineers and bridge builders cried out in unison, "God be with you fellows." They meant it. Our staff looked at them with blank long faces, they felt useless and worthless. The soldiers had not even taken notice of them. The engineers were decent fellows.

That afternoon we marched inland for a half hour. We found shelter around lush bushes and were allowed to sleep. We slept through the night and at dawn the next day we did not feel like getting up. Our commander, Kántor, let us sleep. We slept the entire day away. At dusk we were awakened, lined up for our cabbage and potato soup and read our new marching orders. We were to return immediately to the ridges of the Carpatho-Ukrainian mountains.

Fifteen

We marched in a southerly direction until two o'clock in the morning. We stopped at the roadside, close to a furrowed meadow, and were told we could sleep until six in the morning. Half an hour later, after we had consumed our coffee imitation, a call went out for volunteers. Four men were demanded from each platoon. Sixteen men stepped forward and I was among them. What could be worse than our recent assignment? At least we would get away from the horde of guards that were annoying us with their daily show of ignorance and pretensions of superiority. They were basically army outcasts and they knew it.

We were not told what our task would be. All they said was to march to the city of Stryj, north of our recent bridge building chore and report to a Wehrmacht unit. Three of our armed guards were to accompany us. We were glad to get away. The rest of our company was less venturesome and thought that it be to their benefit to stay with the known environment than to work for the Germans. To us it did not matter. As far as I was concerned, I felt a modicum of adventure meeting the Wehrmacht soldiers and them not knowing that I understood their language. At the present, apparently they needed us. If they wanted to have their jollies with us and had an idea of putting us under duress, then they would have gladly invited our entire company to become participants to their spleen.

We marched for seven hours. Finally we were on the outskirts of Stryj. In a field were eight large wooden sheds. We were directed to them. Wehrmacht soldiers were stationed in front of the entrances. Officers ambled in and out returning with armfuls of canned food.

We were told to help in emptying the storage warehouse of army food provisions and load them onto lorries. The sight of the warehouse's innards was incredible. Sacks of flour were stored to the rafters. Sacks of spilled crystallized sugar littered the floor. In one section of the depot, we had to walk to our hips in sugar to get to the shelves of canned sweet milk and tins of Portuguese sardines. On another shelf were bottles of Hungarian, German and French wines.

We worked there for three days. Day in and day out we loaded the lorries to the brim. A continuous swarm of Wehrmacht officers and soldiers came and filled their haversacks with provisions. They were happy and all smiles.

One early morning we discovered the corpses of twelve Poles in ditches that circled the warehouse. They were men, women and two small children. In their outstretched hands were clumps and traces of sugar which had filtered through the cracks of the woodwork. They had been shot in the head. The Germans proclaimed that the pilferers had deservedly been executed. After all, they were wartime looters.

We had emptied close to three quarters of the warehouse. The Wehrmacht officer in charge told us that no additional provisions would be evacuated. There was no more time for their company to stay in Stryj, they had to move on and supply their frontline units. An *Unteroffizier* (warrant officer) told me that the warehouse would be held under guard pending further orders. Answering my question whether they had considered distributing the excess food among the ill-nourished Polish populace, he replied that the Kommando would not consider such a humanitarian gesture, for in their eyes, the Poles were all traitors to the noble cause of the *Tausendjährige Reich*, the Empire of the Millennium. To us it seemed like leaving the German

Schlaraffenland, or as the English would say, Alice in Wonderland, behind us. The Poles would not get any food, they only deserved to be shot for transgressing Wehrmacht ethics.

The Germans were satisfied with our work. They rewarded each of us with two tins of sardines and three cans of sweet milk. They were generous with us, so they thought. Didn't they have heart after all? The next day they burned down the warehouse with flame-throwers. The Poles should not get any food. The Germans did not want to have such friends. They surely succeeded in making enemies out of the poor Poles.

Next to the destroyed warehouse was a large open terrain. It was used as a landing strip by the German *Luftwaffe* (air force). There were only two damaged Messerschmidt attack planes on the provisional tarmac, presently being repaired, close to a decrepit metal hangar. At the end of this long field were two anti-aircraft cannon (flak) stations. Their personnel scanned the air. Our small group was hunkered down near the air planes waiting for future orders. Not far from us was a small hut which served as an open latrine.

One hour into our wait, excitement showed on the faces of the Wehrmacht soldiers servicing the cannons. Feverishly they cranked their field telephones, listened to messages and immediately directed their artillery pieces toward the eastern horizon. A few minutes later, two Russian Rata fighter planes flew in low sorties over the tarmac and sprayed the entire area with loud bursts of machine gun fire. They also dropped a series of small incendiary bombs on the hangar.

The German artillery men fired wildly at them with grey puffs of exploding shrapnel clouding over the imminent sky above us. All other Wehrmacht soldiers and our Hungarian guards had hurried over to the latrine building, where they sought succour and shelter. Did these soldiers assume that the Russians knew of the latrine? That they would not waste their ammunition on it? We wondered whether it was safer to follow our valiant soldiers.

We entered the latrine. About forty men were sitting, crouching and clasping their hands over their stomachs and loudly belly aching. The stench was unbearable. Yet, our guards held up gallantly under the fecal eruptions. The odour was unbearable. We preferred to take our chances in the open field, being under Russian fighter attack, then to put up with the bombardment of gases enveloping the latrine.

We watched the Wehrmacht gunners fire away at the Russians. They scored no hits. But at least they stood their ground. They were professionals. Unafraid German soldiers following orders. Our guards were not the valiant ones. These German soldiers performed their duties. We watched them and respected them for their bravery. Finally the low flying Ratas were driven off by ground fire from the implacable flak gunners.

We were ordered into the city of Stryj which was now under constant Russian fighter plane attacks. We were to clear an ammunition warehouse. When we arrived, we saw that the three storey building was on fire. The sun was shining brilliantly, it was an energy drenching hot day. Inside the building it should be hotter. Outside, standing on the street at a safe distance, was a crowd of about one hundred civilians, gesticulating toward the warehouse with exclamations of fright. The clatter

of bursting small arms ammunition could be heard through the broken windows of the upper floors. Intermittently, the loud percussions of hand grenades could be heard as the fuses were set off by the heat of the engulfing fire.

We were ordered into the building. The guards waited for us outside at the doors. We knew that it was to become a risky undertaking. We did not want to take undue chances, yet the fact itself that we were inside and the others, the guards and the Poles were cowering outside, gave us a satisfactory sense of strength.

On the ground floor was a long empty wood panelled hallway leading to a rear exit which was blocked by fire eruptions lapping to the ceiling. There was also a side chamber still free of fire, yet it was filled to the rafters with smoke that had seeped down from the upper floors. The room was stacked with wooden crates to a height of three metres. Some of the crates were metal strapped which contained, as shown by their markings, cartridges, machine gun shells and hand grenades.

The wooden floors were brittle and creaked under our steps. On the street, three German lorries had pulled up. We overheard the personnel urging on our guards for us to make haste. They did not venture inside the building. We touched the crates carefully, tapping them for heat expansion. We lined up in a queue and started handing the less heat affected boxes to the guards who were waiting on the sidewalk. They were hesitant in picking up the dangerous cartridge boxes and loaded them onto the Wehrmacht lorries. The Germans were upset with our guards calling them *Schlappschwänze* (German for slack tails) and a loud altercation ensued between them. This, much to the entertainment of the assembled Poles.

Within one hour by working in three groups, we had handed the twenty-five to thirty kilograme boxes to each other and into the arms of the visibly shaken guards waiting at the door. Close to two hundred ammunition boxes were moved. Now, it was the question of dispatching the hand grenade boxes to the safety of the waiting Wehrmacht lorries. This was a more delicate undertaking. The metal strapped containers had been exposed to more of the smouldering heat encroaching the adjacent room. Carefully, and with some hesitation, we again touched the surface of the wooden boxes, verifying whether they had not been heated up too much by the advancing firebrand. The boxes were hot to the touch. Yet, there were no signs of sparks or embers having attached themselves to the receptacles.

One of my friends suggested, "Hey, let's break open some of these hand grenade boxes." "And what the hell are you going to do after?" replied another. "Do you want to play a Hollywood hero and blow up all the Hungarian and Wehrmacht soldiers?" This reminder was a well advised warning of the futility of such an attempt. In all veracity, what could we really accomplish with one or two hand grenades. Yet, this call for reason did not stop Barna, our stone mason friend from prying open one box and removing one grenade which he slipped into his back pocket. This guy was bonkers. There was no time to argue with him, we were constantly urged on by the worried soldiers to speed up the process.

Barna had the hand grenade in his clothing and we would all have to pay the price for this act of resurrection should it be discovered. We cleared all the hand grenade boxes from the floor and the room had been emptied. Now the valiant guards called out to us to climb the burning wooden stairs to the second floor of the structure. We were not going to follow this order. We looked up toward the higher stories which by now were engulfed in flames to an extent that the walls, floors and

doorframes could hardly be seen. Heavy black and red smoke swelled down the staircase. Pieces of wooden planks, crackling in the fire and spewing red-hot embers to the ground floor barricaded the ascent. The guards yelled, "Get up to the second floor." We yelled back, "We'll get to the third floor if you'll give us a hand clearing the fire on the second floor." The big mouths shut their traps. A moment later, the wooden banister, smouldering and entwined with lapping fire came crashing down. The stairs now devoured by fire crumbled to the floor. We had difficulty stepping over the burning beams, doorframes and wall partitions. We had to evacuate the building.

The Poles, still gawking on the street, shouted a loud "Hurray" when they saw us. Some of our clothing had been singed by fire. Our soot-covered faces were black and grey as we emerged healthy and unscathed from the burning inferno. They pushed buckets filled with water and shoved garden hoses into our hands yelling, "Fellows," (no longer Jews), "you are our friends, help us to protect our houses from the spreading fire." Our guards, with rifle butts well-applied, shoved them out of the way. "These Jews are not here to save your louse-ridden shacks from burning."

The Wehrmacht soldiers yelled down from their lorries, "Fellows," (they did not call us Jews either), "you've done a good job. Now, let's load the lorries properly." We hurried to clear the ammunition from the sidewalk and succeeded in filling all the lorries within a half hour. Our efforts, were to a great measure, supplemented by the contribution of the Poles idling about, who were encouraged by the threats of the military to pitch in. After all, it was also in their interest to have as many ammunition boxes as possible removed from their neighbourhood.

We could no longer enter the building. Flames were lapping around the outside wall. Only cartridge explosions, intermingled with the crackling of burning wood could be observed along with the occasional crashing sound of collapsing banisters and stairwells.

The Germans were content with our work and their commanding non-commissioned officer directed us to their local head quarters to obtain further orders. As a token of their appreciation, they issued a letter of recommendation to their commandant.

We marched off to see a lieutenant in charge of supplies. He read the note describing our unflinching devotion to duty in having cleared the burning ammunition depot. With a smile he remarked, "This is the first time that I have heard of a valiant contribution by your kind." He told our guards that our services were no longer required and that we could return to our company who were on a march to the southern mountain regions.

In parting, we were given a few loaves of bread and prune-jam. We were surprised at this gesture. We pulled out of the city and fifteen minutes later ascended on a hilltop where we had a clear view of the town's centre and sat down to munch on our unexpected gift of food rations. An ominous dull explosion had erupted followed by yellowish-red tongues of fire cascading high into the sky. This torrent of erupting building material gave proof that the ammunition depot had burst into oblivion.

At that time there were new military situations developing which we were only later advised of. All these changes had an immediate bearing on our circumstances.

The German defences in Rumania were being rolled back by continuous Soviet advances and faced an imminent collapse. Soviet attacks continued along a perimeter approaching the fortified city Przemyśl. This city, of World War I fame, was approximately one hundred twenty kilometres northeast from our present stay at Stryj. A further push by the Red Army toward the city of Lwow, only eighty kilometres northeast from Stryj threatened to cut off the German and Hungarian armies trying to advance in the Stryj sector eastwards.

This latter strategic menace explained the German's febrile effort to outflank the Russians in an easterly direction by moving north and entrap the Soviets in another *Kesselschlacht* (kettle battle) encirclement. At the same time Russian army units were thrusting into Rumania, southeast of the Carpathian foothills and north of the fortification lines we had built to stem their anticipated breakthrough. It appeared that our defence lines would not bar the Russians from breaking into Hungarian territory for they had chosen to advance and pierce through weaker defence lines, lying below the towering Carpathian mountain ridges. It became apparent that the Russians had outwitted the fascist stratagems and left them in a deplorable lurch.

As a counter measure, the Germans hastened to throw a new defence line around the western borders of Rumania and attempted to stall the Russian offensives in the Transylvanian mountains. A massive Red Army attack had been launched in June, 1944, which also had brought them to the borders of East Prussia and would, within two months, bring them closer to Warsaw. In August, most of Rumania was in Soviet hands together with the oil fields of Ploesti, the only significant oil refineries in Europe which were held by the Wehrmacht.

In the north, Marshal Chernyakhovsky prepared to break through and ultimately capture the ancient capital Königsberg in Eastern Prussia, an important Baltic Sea port. South of this front line, Marshal Rokossovsky amassed forces to penetrate heavy German defences protecting the Prussian state of Pommern (Pomerania). Marshals Zhukov and Koniev, commanded other Soviet armies to the south, preparing to force themselves into central Poland.

Hitler and his loyal OKW generals (super commando of the Wehrmacht), after the unsuccessful coup against his life on 20 July, 1944, in Rastenburg, Eastern Prussia, were in an uncompromising mood of frenzy and carried out executions against the plotters on a large scale. Besides many middle rank officers, three field marshals and five full generals (Generalobersts) lost their lives. Hitler was in no mood to fold and continued to rally his troops to even greater sacrifices and resistance against the Bolsheviks.

The scapegoats for this failed conspiracy, besides the miserable Jew-led Communists, were the western plutocracies which naturally again, were goaded on by international Jewry. For this reason he stepped up the extermination of Jews in the occupied lands. The crematoria of Auschwitz, near Cracow, was working at full blast. According to Rudolf Höss, his trusted leger commandant, up to sixteen thousand people, of undesirable inferior races were dispatched daily to their much deserved end.

In the summer of 1944, up to three hundred thousand Jews were gassed. The furnaces of Auschwitz and other extermination camps, *Vernichtungslager*, were working at full capacity. Although the brunt of the Nazi hatred and resolve for annihilation was directed against the Jews, they were not the only victims. All

parasites who were leeching on the body politic of The Reich had to be done away with. There was no other efficient method than the gas ovens of the camps, built with German engineering ingenuity and led by major industrial complexes such as I.G. Farben.

To make sure that the camps were run in proficient manner, the SS *Totenkopfverbände* (death skull groups) did an exemplary job. Their Auschwitz commander, Höss at his 1946 Nürnberg war trial boasted that at his camp 2,500,000 inferiors were gassed and another 500,000 expired due to starvation. Into the scheme of *Endlösung* (final solution) with the enslavement and slaughtering of undesirable Polish elements the Jewish problem fitted nicely. After all, were they not almost as despicable and symbiotic a race draining the power of the *Herrenrasse*? These inferiors were a cancerous growth and had to be excised. And so they tried their best to achieve this.

Martin Borman, Hitler's party secretary, had declared that, "The fertility of the Slavs is undesirable. In the occupied lands they may be allowed to use contraceptives, or practice abortion...education is dangerous. An educated person is a potential enemy. The priests should teach religion as a diversion for the Poles. The priests should keep them docile and dumb."

Dr Hans Frank, the ruthless governor of Poland, a mass murderer but a genteel hearted devotee of literature and music, declared on one occasion, "The Poles will be the slaves of The Reich." He proceeded accordingly. He proclaimed the closing of all institutions of higher learning. The growth of a new Polish intelligentsia had to be prevented. "The Poles are by nature lazy and shirk work. They won't do this in The Reich."

And, in the concentration camp there were the experiments by the doctors. All in the interest of The Reich. Jews, Poles and Russians were utilized in cybernetic experiments. Particular emphasis was given to the body's resistance to and revival from freezing temperatures. Prisoners were led naked into wintry fields, adjacent to the sadistic quacks scientific stations and doused with or submerged in vats of water. Their body temperatures and other bodily functions were carefully observed and measurements were taken. Sometimes the victims were revived. Himmler, Reichsführer, chief of the SS had a splendid idea conveyed to the charlatan scientists, "The inferiors could be revived faster by body heat than mechanical means." In order to follow the Herr Reichsführer's brainstorm, several incarcerated prostitutes were ordered to snuggle up, naked to the prisoners, who were gradually regaining consciousness in the laboratory. The nude bodies of the prostitutes helped to raise the body temperature of the guinea pigs, in some cases to such an extent that they made attempts in performing coitus.

After the successful freezing and thawing out experiments, the slave victims of these medical tortures were, having fulfilled their usefulness, gassed to death. The experiments, so the medical impostors claimed, would benefit Wehrmacht and Luftwaffen units fighting in the east and the Arctic.

The *Einsatzgruppen*, firing squad commandos of the SS had, in the meantime, contributed their valuable share in ridding undesirables, primarily Jews, off the face of the Earth. Jews, which on orders of Karl Eichmann, head of the Gestapo's Jewish office, were resettled to the east, where they were shot and transferred (resettled) to their graves. The Einsatzkommandos boasted of having eliminated 2,000,000 Jewish parasites, children included.

Sixteen

"Hey fellas," a corporal and one of our three guards, shouted to us, "Let's get a move-on." "Alright, alright," we mumbled, "what's the hurry?" "No hurry really, but we can't stick around here doing nothing but showing off our asses." With this we had to agree. And then he added, "We'll have to get back to our company, they are on their way to Hukliva, again." Then, rubbing his heavily stubbled porcine face while a sly expression entered into his half-closed eyes, he told us, "We have orders to move slowly as we'll have to repair the roadway on our return. It might take us close to a week to get back." He didn't tell us who had given the orders, nor did he want to respond to our queries of "how come a week" when the distance could be done in two days.

The corporal seemed quite happy with this new alleged work assignment and displayed no outward signs that he was anxious to hastily rejoin the company. He and his assistants rather happy to be away from their superiors and the tedious chores of watching over two hundred fifty KMSZ. Seeing their contentment on having been cut loose from conventional military discipline and supervision they were apt to relax their demands upon us and had no objections at all when we sauntered along casually on the dusty, rock-strewn and deeply potholed highway. At our rate of progress, we would not be advancing by more than five to ten kilometres a day.

At noon, our guards noticed a Hungarian army field kitchen. Without hesitation, they lumbered up to the cook and asked to receive rations for themselves and for us, their charges. A sergeant idled up to our corporal and asked, "You corporal, it

seems to me that you are stragglers. Do you have any written marching orders?" Our corporal was momentarily taken aback for we certainly had no marching orders. Our company had sent us to Stryj on verbal orders only received from the Wehrmacht. However, our corporal regained his composure by replying in an assertive voice, "Naturally, otherwise we wouldn't be here. And, do you think if we were stragglers that we'd bother to bring the KMSZ along?" This reasoning seemed to make sense to the inquisitive sergeant who, in a more conciliatory manner replied, "Alright, alright, corporal, cool it. I was only trying to make a point that it isn't a picnic for stragglers to be picked up by the field gendarmes." What do you mean by that?" "Well, as of late, the field gendarmes have orders to bring all deserters before a court martial, or shoot those who are trying to resist arrest." Our corporal only mumbled in a lowered and less assertive voice, "we ain't no stragglers, we are road builders." And with this, we finished our meals and made haste to get away from the nosey, yet perhaps well intentioned sergeant.

Our guards seemed to have become pensive. It was a fact that our company had sent us on our way without orders and this made us suspect of being a unit on the lam. Perhaps it was the intention of our superiors to get rid of us in this way. And really the highway was swarming with Hungarian and German units making their way north to Stryj. Our guards had the bright idea to order us to repair the furrowed and deeply rutted roadway as soon as military units passed by. Granted, we could not do proficient repair work due to the simple fact that we had no tools, save our bare hands to labour with. Our efforts were a complete sham.

Yet, a patrol of Hungarian field gendarmes whom we had noticed before, laid their eyes on us, called out to us in an appreciate manner, "It's about time that some of you repair these lousy roads. One can break his neck just walking on them." We

silently wished them good luck for just doing so and fortunately they did not take any further notice of us.

And so we continued with our deceptions which we had perfected in such a manner that we had two scouts, one at each end of our shambling procession, who were charged in spying for the approach of any military units. Immediately, on their nearing us, we would bend down to the roadway, pick up some small rocks, throw them into the potholes and give the impression of smoothening out the rutted grooves. Some units passed us by, nodded approvingly, others would even shout out to us, "Fellas, that's a good job you're doing."

At a bend in the road, we came to a small, ten metre long, rock covered bridge which spanned a deep ravine. This stretch needed repairing. Holes, some of them half a metre deep had been dug out by passing caterpillared vehicles. We carried stones and small rocks from the ditches and filled the holes in a superficial manner. Only Barna, seemed to apply himself conscientiously by labouring hard with perspiration running profusely down his face. "Hey you, big tail, have you gone bananas, what are you working like a horse for? Who's pushing you?" This exclamation came from one of our guards. Even he could not understand Barna's diligence. "You know me by now Mr Instructor, I like working with stones, it's my trade." "Alright now, get your arse moving, you are not going to make a dance floor out of this rotten road." Barna had a cunning expression on his face. We could not figure out why he was so self-content with his handiwork. He got on his knees, smoothened the road surface with his hands, dusted off his clothing and said, "I like to do a good job all the time. Especially when its for the good of our army." We thought that some bugs might have stung him completely deranging his brains.

Later in the afternoon, just after we had munched on bread and marmalade given to us the other day by the Wehrmacht, a heavy one horse drawn wooden dray passed us by. We motioned to the Polish peasant and asked him for a lift. Reluctantly, he let us board his cart and we passed a few kilometres in complete comfort. It seemed to us that we were on a sightseeing trip. This illusion was suddenly interrupted when we saw two middle aged Wehrmacht soldiers carrying sidearms, bursting out from a stable and leading an unwilling cow by a rope. They stopped our wagon, tied the bovine's rope to the dray, and climbed up to us. They looked dishevelled, old and harassed. They had been limping, hardly able to keep pace with the senile, ruminating animal which showed determination to get away from them.

So it was a relief for the two German warriors to tie the animal to our cart and abandon their struggle with the obstinate beast. "We are all brothers," the two soldiers confessed to our measurable surprise. "We are all suffering by this confounded war. You Jews are victims and so are we. We'd rather be home tilling our fields." Now, this was a change from the normal palaver of the Herrenrasse.

For a moment we thought that they were prodding us to concur with them in lambasting the war effort. This we would not do. On the other hand, they could be truthful in expressing their bitterness which their physical appearance gave credence to. However, we did not want to engage in a political discourse with these warriors, so we only nodded in silence, listening to their lamentations.

The guards and our comrades asked me for a translation of the German's complaints. I did not wait to elaborate, so I simply told them that the two representatives of the master race were only damn tired of the war. To this our guards beckoned in

agreement. The Wehrmacht soldiers removed their boots and started nursing and bandaging their feet. I asked them if they had sustained any injuries, as of late. They replied in the affirmative, "We were on our way north, sitting in a caterpillar supply lorry when passing over a small bridge, we hit something. A small explosion followed and our motorized vehicle skidded and tumbled into the ravine. Three of our comrades were injured and us two, the luckier ones, climbed up to the roadway and saw the fragments of a hand grenade. The caterpillars must have rolled over the shell and ignited the grenade." We looked at Barna with unconcealed respect. It must have been his doing when he was labouring so attentively in improving the condition of the bridgespan's road surface. We did not say a word, other than shaking our heads in a feigned sympathy.

A half hour later our coachman arrived at his homestead. We got off his dray and our two Wehrmacht co-travellers leading their bovine followed our peasant to his barn. There I overheard them wanting to barter the cow for civilian clothes and identification papers. The peasant shook his head in a display of refusal and fright. However the two warriors insisted and grabbed him by his neck, yanking him around until he cried out, "Da, da," meaning "yes, yes" to whatever the Germans had demanded of him. To all indications, the Germans wanted to go AWOL. They tried hard to establish themselves as deserters.

We mumbled up to big tail, "hey Barna, did you do it?" "Do what?" he asked innocently. "You know damn well what we're talking about. The grenade thing, you big tail." "Oh, that? That wasn't so hard to do." "No? Who told you to do that? Don't you know that they could find out who's done it?" "Well, a guy has to take a chance in life sometimes. At least that's what my Momma used to tell me all the time." "Yeah, but we are not talking here about your dear Momma. We are talking

about all of us being discovered and shot. Is that what your Momma would want to happen?" "Alright, lay off guys. I've done it only because you were all scared of what I'm going to do with that lousy grenade." "What do you mean?" we responded, "Well you didn't want me to throw the grenade at anyone, so I took it out of my pocket, placed it amongst the rocks, loosened the pin, just a tiny bit and put gunpowder from some cartridges all over the rocks." "Well, that was a very smart thing of you to do. What would have happened if the grenade had gone off, while we were still around?" "Do you think I'm that stupid? I put the grenade under a flat piece of rock, just below the surface in such a way that only a heavy tank or other caterpillar vehicle could have gnashed and exploded it." And with this explanation, a broad grin spread over his face and he looked like a puffed up cat, a Cheshire cat, if you please, who had just caught a fat rat.

Fortunately for all of us, the explosion had taken place after we had been about twenty kilometres away from the place of sabotage. Naturally, the guards were not privy to Barna's exploit. Neither were they aware of the other schemes a quintet of our group had hatched. We only noticed that they were marching and huddling together, discussing, arguing and casting furtive glances at the guards.

It was the fourth night that we slept a few metres beyond the roadside ditches. Two armed guards were watching over us, intent in stopping us from absconding during the night. They did not trust us, but they needed us. Without us, their presence on the highway would be even more illogical and suspect of desertion. With us in tow, they performed a duty. In a similar manner we needed them. Without them, we would be KMSZ men on the run and subject to immediate execution. But the quintet of Transylvanian KMSZ whom we had noticed being in hushed conversation apparently had other ideas.

They were marching at the tail end of our squad. There, they were surveyed by the corporal and another guard who both carried rifles. The third guard was at the helm of our procession and was equipped with only a bayonet.

Our conspirators carried small flat rocks in their hands. The corporal asked them, "Are you guys nuts or something? Why are you lugging rocks along? Aren't there enough rocks on the road?" "But they are," replied one of them, "nice flat and smooth, and if we have to do some finishing work they will be perfect." The two guards shook their heads, as if they were saying, "These Jews won't go bonkers, because they are already nuts." But our quintet thought otherwise.

They told us to leave them dawdling in the back and move up to the sole guard leading our cavalcade. On their signal, we were to surround and immediately immobilize him. Whatever that was meant to be. We still did not know what they were up to. At dusk, for some unknown reason, there was a lull in the road traffic. We had not seen any units pass us by. In a bend of the road, at a wooded area, we heard some commotion in the back. One of the five gave us a signal. We surrounded our guard and held his arms. We still did not know for what purpose. Then we saw that the quintet had thrown themselves over the corporal and his subordinate and held them to the ground. Out of nowhere a column of German motorcyclists emerged. They were only ten metres from the would be assassins. Immediately they had to release their grip on the two guards. They did not have time to smash their heads in with the flat rocks they had carried with them the entire afternoon. The guards got to their feet. They could not and would not comprehend that those five KMSZ had criminal intents. No such attempts were ever encountered.

Our guys had to give up their, so they thought, well conceived plans of murder. The roads became full again with incessant traffic. "What did you guys have in mind, jumping us like that?" asked the corporal in a still shaky voice as he struggled to get to his feet. "Well, didn't you hear the shots coming from the woods Mr Corporal? There was an attack by partisans and we pulled you down to protect you." "I didn't hear any shots. Are you sure you weren't dreaming? Or what were you up to, you guys?" "Nothing else," said their leader, a gangly guy from Kolozsvar, "How many times do we have to repeat to you that there were shots from the forest." "I'm not so sure," said the corporal. "Well," said our friend, "luckily we have better ears than you have." And really, we could hear rifle shots now. But they had come from the Wehrmacht soldiers, firing at invisible targets. We released all three guards. Then we spoke to the leader of the conspirators. "What did you guys have in mind? Do you think by killing the guards you would have helped us all?" "Yeah, for sure." "How in the world?" "We would have pulled them inside the woods, taken their rifles, uniforms and IDs and we would have become your guards." "Smart idea," we replied, "and what about the third guard?" "On our signal," their leader replied, "you should have strangled him." Nice picnic, we thought. Fortunately, it did not come to pass.

However, we did agree that on the surface the murder attempt looked good. If we had no real guards to worry about, then we could move about freer. But, and here the problems came into play, what about identification papers? The soldier's documents and photos did not match the description of anyone among us. Was this a fact which had escaped the conspirators attention? Most likely. And the second factor, how long would it have taken for the military to discover the corpses and put us under suspicion. Not long for sure. The area was brimming with military convoys and field gendarme patrols. We had to hatch different plans.

On the sixth day of our slow procession, the guards were finally convinced that we had saved their lives from a partisan attack. The soldiers, especially the corporal, became increasingly more open minded to our conversations and listened intently as we discussed the plan with them to return to the Motherland. We told them, "Look, so far, we've been very successful in avoiding interrogations by field gendarmes. We're convincing all doubters that we are on a work assignment. If we continue to play our roles well and pass through all checkpoints by talking in one voice and that we are in a hurry to rejoin our company, they'll believe us, without checking papers."

Up to this point, and based solely on our experiences, we knew that this was wishful thinking. It was quite unlikely that all control agents and military police would fall for our ruse. But when problems present themselves, we will have to adapt and try to wiggle through the difficulties. Taking this chance was worthwhile in order to return to Budapest. As long as the guards stuck it out with us, the odds were in our favour.

The guards did listen to our suggestions. More than two weeks had gone by since we last saw our company. By now, a week later, they should have reached Hukliva. We had decided to make haste and reach the spur tracks of Lavocsne, then on to the main railway line leading to Munkács, which was one hundred kilometres west.

We passed the sixth night in a deserted, broken down wooden barn. A heavy rainstorm tore at the laths that were swinging freely from sidings, threatening to detach them completely from the creaking woodwork which was straining to avert imminent collapse from the force of the raging squalls. We were soaked to the skin from torrents of water coming in through the broken roof and rafters. We had spent an entire night awake, shivering in the corners of the shed where the rain would pelt

us to a lesser degree. In the morning, we emerged from this barn in a most grumpy mood.

"Look corporal," we said, "when we get to the station master, you will have to insist that we must immediately join our company." "I know, I know," said the corporal with a tinge of doubt in his voice. "If he becomes difficult, you will have to demand in a harsh military manner that travel papers be issued or you would have to report him for obstruction." "It's easier for you to figure out all of these lies than to carry them through. After all, if they catch me that will be the end of my military career." What a career, we thought.

At noon, we had finally reached Lavocsne. A small cabin served as the station master's command post. The man, a portly fellow, was garbed in an undistinguishable uniform, half Ukrainian, half Hungarian. This duality seemed to indicate that he was a paramilitary figure serving fascist commands.

At the door of the ticket office, our corporal took heart and entered the hut with a determined swagger. He saluted the official, and in a broken pidgin-Hungarian, conveyed his message to the Slav that travel papers had to be immediately obtained for our travel to Munkács. If our company could not be found there, then on to Budapest, which was our work battalion's ultimate destination.

The station master eyed the corporal with suspicious, green pig-like eyes and flipped through a dirty, well-thumbed travel log book. "Mr Corporal, I'll have to check my records to see if I can find travel orders for your squad. I can only issue papers if there are signed instructions allowing your group to travel through the military zones." Our corporal and his two underlings shuffled uncomfortably and looked at

each other with flushed faces, their anxieties inhibiting any further conversation.

Finally, with a crafty smile spreading over his flat face, the station master commented, "I'm sorry, but I can't find any orders in my books." "But there have to be orders," insisted the corporal." "Yes, Mr Corporal, I understand you quite well. You are anxious to join your company as soon as possible in the Motherland. You are a valiant soldier who only wants to perform his duties." "Yes, yes," affirmed our corporal, "we must find our company. By now, they are probably in Budapest."

The station master became more animated as this conversation progressed. Then, rubbing his chin and carefully scratching his scalp from where he removed an insect, possibly a head louse, he sanctimoniously declared, "Look, I want to prove my patriotism to you as well. I can't help you, but there is an officer in the waiting room who could probably sign the travel papers for you to join your battalion in Budapest. We looked at each other with consternation. We did not want to have any officers become involved with our deception. The discovery of our scheme could mean a court martial for the group. "It's all right, it's all right," averred the corporal, "if you have no papers then we will march on to Munkács by foot." Our flustered guards wanted to get out of the station as fast as possible.

The station master, his apprehensive smirk now having been replaced by a wide grin replied in a sardonic tone, "Mr Valiant, Mr Corporal, why are you in such a hurry? Speak to the officer, I'm sure he will help you." And with this, he opened the door to the waiting room from where the subdued murmur of a large crowd of would-be travellers emitted. In a loud voice piercing the din of the crowd, he yelled out, "Mr Ensign, would you please come to my office. These men are soldiers and KMSZ labourers and are in need of travel orders to get to Budapest."

It was obvious that the station master relished blurting out this message to all and sundry. Our group wanted to take the door before the officer could confront us, only the station master barred the exit. From the other end of the ticket office the officer entered. It was Ensign Kántor, the commander of KMSZ company XIII/2.

The station master recounted to Kántor the gist of our travel scheme. Turning to the station master, Ensign Kántor said, "Don't worry, these soldiers and KMSZ are not deserters. They were told to report here for travel papers." The station master listened with a disappointed and partially sulking expression as Kántor continued to justify our ambiguous assertions. The Slav had been under the impression that he deserved gratitude for delivering deserters to higher authority. "These men are reliable members of the valiant Hungarian Army, and are above suspicion of evading duty."

With this firm declaration, Kántor turned his back on the frustrated station master who, could not resist but stutter, "Mr. Ensign, I was certain that these men were deserters. I should receive a commendation or perhaps even a promotion." "Not a promotion," retorted Kántor, "but a demotion for unjustly accusing honest Hungarian army personnel. With this he motioned us to follow him, slammed the door shut of the waiting room, smiled, wagged his finger and turning to us, said, "Fellows, don't give me any more problems like this. The time for desertion has not yet arrived." We looked at Ensign Kántor, a fatherly figure, with deep respect and affection. We were indeed lucky to have this man as our company commander.

Our company, squatted on the clay floor of the station's waiting room consuming their lunch. Kántor called out to them, "Here are your dearly missed comrades. They must be starved." And turning to the cook, "Hey, cook double rations for

these poor, hard-working volunteers." We were disappointed to see that our escapade had failed, yet relieved to have avoided a court martial.

Seventeen

Our company had been improving, widening and firming up access roads to the main highway and mountain passes for over two weeks. This explained Kántor's presence at Lavocsne. Now it was time to march to Hukliva, gathering up company equipment and waiting for further orders.

We arrived at Hukliva the next morning. We were stationed at the deserted place of our former host, our aspiring father-in-law, his family having long been driven off to Polish death camps. We were in the house of the same religious fellow who, months ago, wanted to betroth his ever so lovely daughters to us. Unfortunately fate had caught up with them. The patriarch had been unsuccessful in saving his daughters. His efforts to move to the Motherland proved futile. Their homestead became abandoned, their possessions voided and looted by neighbours. Now, our guards were living in his cottage and we were stationed in the stables and goat pens.

It occurred to us to search for valuables hidden in our shelters. At night, by a flickering candle light, we dug into the ground. Barely a few inches below the surface, we unearthed silver candlesticks, cutlery in wooden boxes, prayer shawls and a small Torah scroll. We crawled up to the horses stable and stole a canvas blanket. On our return to our pen, we wrapped the uncovered belongings tightly in this waterproof cover, dug a three-foot hole and cached the family's treasure to dodge greedy looters.

We stayed at Hukliva for two days. It was August, 1944, and sweltering heat descended upon the mountain range. Cool spots could only be found among the

dense firs and impenetrable copses. At six o'clock in the morning we were read the daily order. We were given a new fortification assignment in the so-called Death Valley. This was a geographical stretch that extended from the Galician, or Western Ukraine mountains and skirted the Carpathian heights, approaching the towns of Kolomea on the Pruth river, near the Moldavian SSR, and the city of Tarnopol, on the Seret River. The mountain elevations harbour Death Valley, a fissure in the Carpathians which extended into the Ukraine for seventy-five kilometres.

We were to hastily fortify the mountain ranges which, according to military high command, were to become defence lines against the advancing Red Army. Our assignments called for building machine gun nests, flak encampments, narrow gauge railway tracks and road construction. The trek to Death Valley should take ten days.

Our logistic planning was poor. Our food supply was constantly two days behind our advancing units. Consequently, we had to carefully ration our food. At lower elevations we found wild, green apples and berries of various colours. Spring water, in abundance trickled down mountain sides. Yet, gradually we became enfeebled by a lack of food. On the eighth day into our laborious trudge, we approached a small mountain stream. The sun was still radiating furnace-like temperatures, blistering our skin and cramping our stomach for lack of food.

In a curve of the road, placed on a knoll, were several large army type cauldrons. A bugle blare sounded. "Hark, an army detachment." Most likely, they were called for a repast. Hot steam swirled skyward from the kettles. We were nudging each other, asking, "What's in those boilers? Soup, cabbage, noodles or what other heavenly food?" The kettles kept the secrets of their contents well. We could not

smell any odour. Sitting on the mounds were half-naked Hungarian soldiers. Hung on long wooden poles for drying, were white linen sheets. What was the significance of that? It could not be that they were flying the flags of surrender? Surrender to who? There were no enemies around. Unless...

Yes, the valiant soldiers were fighting a losing battle. They were attacking lice, the enemy, with their fingers and cracking them between their nails. Lice, which had invaded the clothing and body of the valiants. It was the result of the soldiers having neglected to bathe regularly.

At least we, in our poor physical state, had taken precautions not to yield to the infestations of these undesired tenants. The soldiers on the other hand, seemed to have disregarded the importance of eradicating the pests, until their harassment became intolerable, requiring a military counterattack.

The soldiers were plucking away at the lice and grinding them to death. They drained their underwear in the swiftly flowing creek and finally deposited their partially sanitized lingerie in the hot, boiling containers. The same cauldrons we had hoped would contain badly needed nourishment. Our disappointment in having missed out on a Lucullan feast caused us to quickly get away from this less than tantalizing environment.

We had arrived at our first work camp. It was in a dense undergrowth amidst towering fir trees. We would have to clear a road through this pristine environment. The ground would have to be graded, homologized, and prepared for a narrow gauge spur line transporting conveyances ammunition, mortars, an assortment of

artillery and flak to peaks dominating the heights.

Our work was cut out for us. We were informed that our assignment would last into late Autumn and possibly to early winter. Considering our lack of winter clothing and sparse food supply, our outlook for the near future looked bleak.

We were also told that a few thousand other KMSZ and ethnic labour battalions would be contributing to the war effort in this area. They were of so-called communists and sundry partisan elements, together with Rumanian, Polish, Russian, Bulgarian and Yugoslav work-shirker, parasites in the fascist parlance.

The forest lay in deep darkness. A desolate stillness enshrouded the verdant, dank woods. No signs to reveal our presence within the sylvan enclosures. Suddenly, a piercing, jostling whistle blow cut through the dormant isolation of the dense verdure. It was four-thirty in the morning and was the signal for the roll call. We crawled out from underneath the bushes, where we had spent a shivering, cold night. We tied our shoelaces, fastened our belts and skittered down to the clearing next to a hoarfrosted, shallow creek where breakfast was to be distributed. The forest remained in a sinister opaqueness, refusing to let the first faint glimmer of a translucent firmament broach its somnolence.

We stood in line with picks, shovels, a canteen cup and a spoon waiting for breakfast. Roll call followed. Lantos was missing. They called off the serving of our coffee. We had to look for this laggard. "Hey there, maestro, wake up, the curtain has already gone up." Back home he was a musician with the Budapest Opera House Orchestra. "Trara, trara," we imitated the bugle call of hunters. What an identical setting to Flotow's *Martha* opera. "Hares and rabbits, here we come...trara,

trara. Oh, let's shut up. Better we say lice and fleas, here we are."

Lantos was found and yanked to his feet. We all sprinted back down to the creek. We dipped our hands into the ice cold water, rubbed our faces, and cleansed our loose teeth affected with caries. Finally they let us line up for our grub. Three containers filled with so-called coffee. Coffee surrogate cubes, consisting of malt and beans, dissolved in dirty, lukewarm water. A slice of bread to carry us over until midday. At least the warmth of the brew felt good. At five o'clock we marched off to work. At five-thirty, we started homologating the ground for a narrow spur rail line.

Around ten o'clock, Simárdi, his limbs still cold and aching from a night spent awake in his dugout, asked Mr Instructor, Ursui, the illiterate gypsy guard, for permission to warm himself around a smoldering fire of damp fir branches. Ursui, feeling charitable, gave his consent grandiosely, "Alright, you God-forsaken wheelbarrow, I'll give you five minutes." Simárdi Laci rubbed his hands over the fire and felt strength returning to his body. The heat calmed his senses. Momentarily, he felt good. The guard told him, "Time is up. I know you wouldn't mind loitering around the fire all day long but that's not for you. The fire's been lit for us valiant soldiers." Simárdi readied himself to follow orders, however it happened much too slowly for Ursui's liking.

Mockingly, he lifted his gun, aiming it at his subordinate and said in half jest, "Simárdi, you rotten wheelbarrow, run or I'll shoot." Simárdi picked up his spade and while taking two steps stumbled and tripped over the tree roots that were hidden in the mud. He fell with his spade landing in front of Ursui's feet.

Mr Instructor, taken aback by this unexpected movement thought that Simárdi tried

to attack him. He fired his gun instantaneously, two bullets hissing by the head of Lance Corporal Attila. This valiant soldier thought that Ursui had gone bonkers. "You stupid, bloody, stinking dog! Do you want to kill me because you are jealous of my rank?"

Ursui stuttered, stammered and could barely open his mouth to calm his superior. "No, no, Mr Lance Corporal. It was an accident. My gun went off without my permission." This was even too much for Attila to accept. He said, "I think that you are too empty-headed to carry a gun. I'll report you to the company commander asking that the gun be taken away from you." Ursui felt shattered. His gun was all his pride and it was all the fault of Simárdi. He had to pay him back somehow.

Around eleven o'clock, Simárdi approached Mr Instructor, Ursui, with the urgent request to be allowed to empty his bowels. Ursui gave his consent without much enthusiasm. He had already heard of Simárdi, this one could not control his bowel movements. Simárdi had dysentery. Simárdi withdrew near some bushes. Ursui observed his activities with open animosity, he could not tolerate Simárdi any longer. Attila's threat to deprive him of his much beloved gun and the ridicule he would have to face in being accused by the company commander of having fired his gun to ward off an alleged threat by a prostrate shovel, was too much for him to bear.

He approached Simárdi and noticed with great satisfaction that Simárdi had taken inadmissible liberties with the permission received. He hollered at Simárdi, "You stinking wheelbarrow, you think you can do whatever you want?" Simárdi was squatting near some bushes and could not figure out what to make of this accusation. He kept silent and hastened to finish his scatological activity. Ursui

lambasted Simárdi, "I have given you permission to only empty your bowels and you are urinating as well. You have not asked for permission to do this and I have not given you permission for it." Simárdi tried to apologize. Ursui did not listen to him. He walked up to Simárdi, raised his gun and threatened to shoot. He wished to shoot the wheel barrow, but knew that he could not justify such an act. Simárdi pulled up his pants and Ursui followed him. Ursui slipped in the muck, his gun went off and a bullet hit Simárdi in the chest. Simárdi groaned once and as Ursui rushed to him, Simárdi was no longer breathing.

Simárdi's blood was discolouring the ground and coalescing in a widening puddle. The sound of the fired gun and Simárdi's tortured groan had cast a sudden pall of silence over our work gang. Only Ursui's shrieked laments could be hear, "Oh God, oh mamma, I didn't want to kill him. I am a good soldier. A brave soldier. I didn't want to kill wheelbarrow." He was led away by the other guards. Ursui continued wailing, "Oh my dear little God, oh my dear little God, I don't want to go to the Devla." He was supplicating God not to send him to hell. Attila screamed at Ursui, "Stop that whining, shut up you idiot." Attila had a gut feeling that he must silence this valiant soldier, least the Jews lose all respect for the guards.

The company commander was quickly called to the scene. He listened to the circumstances and motives leading up to this tragedy. After carefully weighing all of the facts, he declared the murder to be an accident. Ursui, to avoid further embarrassment, or possible retributions by the staff for having lowered their morale, would be transferred to another battalion. The company commander ordered two of our men and one guard to remain with the body. We were marched off to another section of the mountain pass.

The old German military march lament of the fallen comrade came to mind, *Ich hatte einen Kameraden, einen besseren findest du nicht, eine Kugel kam geflogen...*, (I had a comrade, a better one you cannot find a bullet came aflown...). This woeful dirge aptly suited Simárdi Laci, poor fellow.

In the afternoon, company commander, Ensign Kántor, sent two soldiers to the supply depot for tools and dry oak boards. A coffin was constructed. Ursui, the guilt-ridden Mr Instructor, and our cook dug the grave for Simárdi. A Catholic army chaplain, recognizing Simárdi's partial Christian ancestry, and a Rabbi, performed the last rites and benedictions.

The cross and Star of David were placed on the grave sight. Two men, our honour guard, remained at his place of interment for two days and two nights. A crude marker was placed on the burial mound with the inscription, "Simárdi Laci. He died for his Homeland."

We had finished a days work and marched back to our assembly place, a clearing in the woods, next to the banks of an eddying creek. Dusk fell. In front of a hastily built, crude, wooden shack which served as our mobile canteen, were two large kettles. Their mysterious contents without dispensing alimentary clues, were enshrouded in puffing steam.

We lined up in four columns, ten feet apart and at a respectful distance of thirty feet from our place of worship, the containers of food. The clatter and clanging of our implements, spades and picks permitted us to murmur expectantly, "What do you think they have hodgepodge this time for supper?"

One of our fellows had to express the unspoken veracity, we did not want to be enlightened about, "Well, you know how they go about it. First, they wash their hands and faces in the warm water which, for convenience's sake, will be used as a base for our soup. Then they add some leaves and grass. Then they strengthen the broth with rancid grease, removed from pots and pans. Some salt, corn glumes, peas and beans and the perfect meal is ready for the scum of the earth."

It became darker and darker. A bone-chilling wind stormed down the mountain slopes, whipping its furor against the trees and vented its rage against the entwined coniferous branches which creaked, bent and ached in a muffled sound of anguish.

Tattered grey low-flying clouds scudded across a dark, starless horizon. At the far end of the mountain ridges, the jaundiced beams of a sickle moon failed to breach the gloomy overcast. Dampness pervaded the silent, threatening, vast expanse of forest, imparting an absorbing aura of despair.

Nature, God, man, we were back in the woods. Slavs, German, Celtic tribes. God made man? Possessed of intelligence, cunning, strength and love. Man to fight, own and give. God, he made us less than a worm in the soil. But, "hark." Man was here. Man by accident, or the will of Satan. Tools to use others for tools. They were sitting in the shack, we stood in silent anticipation. The darkness relaxed our features.

Underneath the kettles, a log fuelled, smoky fire. The sergeant stepped forward from the canteen shack. His other henchmen followed, their stomachs satiated. They had spent a leisurely hour feasting like unrestrained gluttons on soup, meat, fruit and wine.

Déry, the wiry, sadistic sergeant, stood in front of the company. "Third Company, attention!" And at attention we stood. At least, the fellows in the front rows. It gave us a little satisfaction to fool him. The rest of the company stood at ease. It was too dark and he could not tell. The flickering lights of the lapping flames reflected a reddish glow upon his face. He began to utter another of his rambling, self-exalting harangues, "We soldiers, instead of being in the frontlines fighting the barbaric, stinking sons of the steppes, who want to destroy our thousand-year-old country, have to stay here with you, looking after you, you dirty capitalists. You filthy horde of bums!"

Well, we did not pay too much attention to him, we knew him. He would lapse into a five-minute ranting, shouting himself hoarse until, at the very crescendo of his monologue, his voice would give out. He could not yap any further. This time, however, we were wrong. He exceeded his speaking engagement by another five minutes. He shrieked, his voice screeched, not unlike the nocturnal squeaks of warring bats. "We have to conserve our strength," he continued. "Hell, why don't you drop dead and conserve the strength of other people," said someone in a half-loud voice. He did not hear that. He just continued mouthing off. "You waste the power and strength of our country." He meant us. "We have to save paper and clothes. Put aside scrap iron and metals. We have to make more guns." He could not stop, he liked his own voice.

"No, you don't want that. You don't save and economize. You don't care. You just want to gobble up all the food we have." "Oh you idiot, why don't you finally shut up, for God's sake," we thought. No, he did not want to. During the day, he had picked up shreds of conversation by officers, discussing the necessity of economizing with raw materials for word increased war potential.

He had to utilize those fragments of our conquistadores. "Anywhere we look, there are enemies. Partisans, lurking in the woods." By way of explanation, he elaborated, "You see, when I was going to the supply warehouse the other day to get you some food, you lousy, good-for-nothings, a partisan, a friend of yours I bet, took a pot shot at me from the bushes." He tore off the cap from his head to show some bullet holes. Someone chuckled. "What was that?" No one answered. He became flustered. "You lousy dogs. I'll show you. All of you run to the creek and jump into it!" He drew his handgun from its holster. "Dirty dogs. I'll teach you." Half of the company was chest-deep in the icy cold water, Déry picked up a burning log. He wildly flailed away at the labourers standing nearest to him. He wanted everyone to take a bath in the cold stream.

The derisive chuckle had come from someone who knew the true story behind Déry's gallant adventure. It was not quite the same as he had recounted. Déry was incensed at becoming the butt of laughter or ridicule. A guard who had accompanied him to the depot had dozed off in their horse-drawn cart. He was awoken by a volley of rifle shots. He saw Déry firing at the wagon and then into the bushes. The soldier asked Déry, in an alarmed voice, for the reason of his rifle fire. Déry answered that some partisans had attacked and he was warding them off. No partisans were visible and the only noticeable shots were those from the sergeant's rifle. Déry was fighting phantoms. He ran after them into the bushes. His cap fell onto the trails. He sprayed the area with his bullets. His cap was hit twice. Thus, he produced proof of the attack and his heroic repulsion of the partisans. Déry had a guilty conscience.

After he had worked off his rage, he relented by ordering us to, "Get out, supper is ready, fall in line!" We lined up, removed our canteen cups and spoons from our

belts and waited. The guards had wooden bats in their hands. As we picked up our rations of soup, the guards reaffirmed their authority by clobbering those they disliked. The sergeant examined everyone's clothes to verify whether they had dunked themselves in the icy waters. The fellows who had dry clothes, had ostentatiously not taken a bath. No bath, no supper. The dry chaps were forced into the rivulet. They had to purify themselves. Every thirty seconds they had to submerge their heads into the water. It was a christening which lasted for one hour. Baptism performed, the chaps were marched back to their quarters in the bushes.

The rest of us trotted back to our homesteads, crawled underneath the boughs and thorny shrubs. A refuge unfit for dogs, but good for us. We sought silence and a modicum of shelter. At eleven o'clock, the guards' bugler sounded the reveille. We thought this was a joke. It was not. The bugler and the guards were only stone drunk. They were singing, laughing, drinking and bantering in their wooden cabanas. We tried to sleep but it was impossible. Then we heard one of the Mr Instructors bragging, "Pista, I locked her husband in the toilet, chased her to the kitchen and cooked her well." The fellow was recounting his amorous adventures. "Ah, what a woman. She almost choked me with her many skirts. She must have wore at least eight skirts. I had a hard time finding my way." "Oh shut up," said Misha, he was a Rumanian guard, "I don't believe a word of this. You should have flushed yourself in the toilet." They were cussing and cursing each other. Then they started singing, "Oh Hungary, you are beautiful, you are magnificent, Hungary." "These patriots," sighed one of my neighbours in the shrubs, "they'd better be getting some sleep, otherwise, they won't have the strength to fight the guerrillas, hiding in the woods."

We slept. In the morning, around five o'clock, the sound of the bugles blasted us to our feet. We were covered by snow which had fallen during the night.

The soles of my shoes were tied to the uppers with a piece of wire. I had salvaged the shoe soles from a burning school building in Stryj, a few months earlier. It was at the time of one of the many Soviet aerial bombardments of that city. My shoe repair job was not a masterpiece of professionalism. The soles had a tendency to detach themselves from the uppers. I had to get accustomed to tread carefully on the ground by constantly lifting my feet. I had to walk with a deliberate step. Shoes were essential, in some respects, they were more important than the extra piece of clothing.

We scampered down to the assembly place. Déry was already there. He was in a jovial mood. We did not understand the reason for it. He hawked and spit into the kettle containing our breakfast coffee. "Let's start this lovely day by drinking coffee, gentlemen," bowing like a courtly butler, "breakfast is being served." Slowly, all of us had succumbed to mental fatigue. We did not and could not understand the guards, our slave drivers. They were incomprehensible, inhumane idiots. We became like them.

As we approached the kettle to get our coffee surrogate, Déry spit into our canteen cups, or dropped grass and other chaff into our drinks. Déry commanded, "Now, all of you, raise your cups and drink your coffee." A mean grin spread over his visage, as he said, "To your health, gentlemen." We lifted the canteen cups to our lips but no one drank a drop of the brew. We marched off to work on an empty stomach.

Eighteen

We were building a narrow gauge railway line. We drilled holes into the rocks. Soldiers and slave guards placed dynamite sticks into the openings. *Take cover, detonations...loose rocks excavated, and shovelled away..prepare roadbeds..level, grade and hemologize ground...slate plates, schists carefully detached from rock layers...slabs and splinters of rocks, slates, hammered into small pieces and strewn over narrow paths to solidify a rail bed foundation...wheelbarrows, we called them the Budapest taxi cabs were everywhere, pushed around madly by insane people...us...we felled trees...the trees almost felled us.*

I had a high fever. This was no excuse for shirking work. I was in a daze. I had to help Hungary. Without me, Hungary could not survived so it seemed.

Where a dense growth of trees appeared, we chopped them down. At every two metres a giant conifer toppled over, crossways and I was almost struck by one. Someone pulled me away. We cut up timber, pollards, posts, made tree nails, beams. We dragged lumber to the creek, bridged it, put a span across it. Two of our fellows started engraving their names onto a wooden crossbar. Were they compulsive xylographers? My thoughts were illogical, my head ached, I was talking to myself. Fever gripped my entire body. I was trembling. Was there a way to survive here? I tried not to think. I moved as if under hypnosis. They forced me to work. No one was excused from labour. The greatest war effort was the ultimate goal to pursue.

We had to carry rail spans. We placed them on top of wooden cross bars. It was too cold, it was below zero. Our hands, touching iron, froze to the rails. We had no gloves. We tore strips of cloth from our garments and wound them around our fingers and hands. It helped a bit. A guard gave us matches to light a campfire. The sergeant had the fire put out, declaring, "You feel cold because you don't work hard enough." I did not know, was he right, or were we just too exhausted or plain stupid to know if he had spoken the truth? We could no longer differentiate between right or wrong.

We sensed the nearness of midday. Lunch hopefully, lunch. Lunch meant life. The Jewish cook, a newly assigned fellow, a fat guy rolled out the food kettles which were sitting on a cart. The cook was a duplicitous, condescending blockhead. He doled out food whimsically. He had his favourites. The smell of cabbage permeated the air. The sun moderated the frosty chill. Things looked up. We got our watery cabbage soup. Thank heavens.

About one mile from us, farther north, close to the peak of the mountains and on the paths leading to the Western Ukraine, the town of Kolomea, the Dnyester River and the Podolski Plateau were toiling Serbian forced labourers. They were grouped in several battalions comprised of 3,000 men. They were former partisans and political prisoners who had fought the Wehrmacht and Hungarian Army in their homeland.

They were a hardy, combative and aloof people. They most certainly did not accept the claim of superiority by the *Herrenrasse*, the German master race. On the contrary, the Serbs felt superior to the Germans, thanks to their traditional fighting spirits which had contributed to their survival through the ages. They were

confident that their compatriots would eliminate the occupying German and Hungarian armies in the same way, as they had freed themselves for centuries from the shackles of other occupying powers.

These Serb prisoners were treated with kid gloves by their German and Hungarian military guards. The fascist command knew that the Serbs had a strong militarily resisting home base. Any adverse news concerning their maltreatment by the guards would find its way back to Yugoslavia. The fascists had enough problems with the restive indigenous Serb population, without stoking the fires of partisan resistance, by excessively abusing their captives.

The Serbs were grading a stretch of mountain pass. At noon, they had come down from the heights, and camped in our vicinity. They were eating their midday meal, only a hundred feet from our company. Their lunch consisted of a vegetable stew with large chunks of beef and plentiful helpings of bread.

We started our lunch before them. They derisively looked at our meagre rations. Then they looked at us. One after the other poked his neighbour in the side, pointing at us. We were skeletons. We were starved. Our hands shook as we slurped our thin soup. My weight had dropped to 50 killogrammes. The Serbs looked at our torn and ragged winter clothing. They stopped laughing. A few sneeringly remarked in Hungarian, "Jewish workers." The others rallied at them "Shut your asses. We don't care who they are. Russians, Italians or Jews. They are people who are maltreated by the confounded fascist bandits. These poor young fellows, be they Jews, they look like walking corpses."

Louder voices could be heard coming from their rows. "These damn Nazis are starving these young guys. We don't like this." The German and Hungarian guards became fidgety. They gripped their rifles more securely. One could not trust the Serbs. They always seemed to have an axe to grind.

Now the voices sounded in chorus. "We don't want these boys to be starved. They are our brethren. We don't care who they are. We couldn't even care if they were Germans." We did not say a word. The guards just stood around saying and doing nothing. In our case, had we raised such a commotion, the slave drivers would have fired into our lines.

The Serbs lined up in front of their food kettles for a second serving. The guards were only too happy to accommodate them. Apparently, the Serbs' protestations had blown over.

A short, heavysset, middle-aged Serb was the first one to approach the canteen. He turned around, facing his countrymen. He first addressed them in Serbian, then in Hungarian. "*Szluchajte srbsky,*" he admonished them, "Listen to me Serbs. As long as they are not giving these young guys, be they Jews, I don't give a damn, decent food, I'm telling you and these God damn guards we won't touch ours."

A unanimous loud cheer of approval came from the ranks of the Serbs. They started shouting, "*Hlatzsiye Yugoslavia, da peklo Nazi Germania.*" They kept on repeating the chant, "Long live Yugoslavia, to hell with Nazi German." Their hatred of the guards and defiance was resolute. The guards felt alarmed. The Serbs were tough. One could not dismiss their anger as poppycock. A Hungarian officer stepped forward. He cocked his revolver and ordered his soldiers to fix bayonets.

The officer shouted, "You Serbs, take your meals, if you want a second serving. But shut your mouths or you will be sorry." The Serbs silently glared at him.

They lined up for their second serving. All of them. The first man had his canteen cup filled with the thick meat stew. He dumped the food on the ground. The officer yelled, "You Serb, are you crazy? Stand over there," motioning to a clearing, "I'll talk to you later." The second man repeated the same action. The Hungarian officer grew red in the face and hoarse from shouting, "You Serbs, have you gone crazy? Any more food sabotage and I'll make you regret it." The third man got his food and emptied his ration canister on the ground. The fourth, fifth and all of them did the same. The officer had motioned to all the obstructionists to stand aside. He had begged them, he had threatened them, he had cajoled them not to sabotage the food. All in vain. Their entire outfit of five hundred men had stood aside as the officer warned of punishments.

The officer did not dare punish five hundred Serbs. They were let off with a severe warning. They were rushed back to work on their road section. The Serbs refused their supper. All of them. They refused to touch food the next day. They demanded equal food for us. At dawn on the Serbs's third hungerstrike day, a cartload of food arrived for us from the battalion's supply depot. We were given our first meal of plentiful quantity. Better and more food was promised later on.

It was the first time that the Serbs had accepted and consumed food. They had won. Their point of view had been accepted. From the other side of the woods, we heard the patriotic resistance songs of the Serbs, challenging and ridiculing the fascists. The fascists did not want any more problems from them. They were glad that the Serbs were only singing. The Serbs were a decent group of people, as they

had said, "our brethren."

Our good fortune of more food lasted for only four days. The quantity and quality of meals had diminished and deteriorated. Soon, we were served our old, well-known hogwash: The Serbs sent to another work area.

We toiled in the forests for another five weeks. The weather turned colder and frostier. Winter had arrived and there was no letup in below zero temperatures. We were incapable of contributing to the glory of Hungary and to the unflinching war effort to "make our armies victorious." We did not have the energy to do so.

At night we crawled into our shelters underneath the scaly boughs and branches of the conifers. At dawn, we arose half numb, ankylotic, our garments frozen stiff and covered by snow. Our army command did not provide us with sufficient food. We tottered about like zombies.

We were given a reprieve. Our work camp, which was at a seven thousand foot elevation in the Carpathian Mountains, was to be abandoned. The command finally had realized that we could not properly function without sufficient food rations. Especially, at such a high altitude.

We were ordered into a new work area. It was at a lower elevation and deeper in the forests. Our new location was bordering on another, wider mountain stream, next to precipitous cliffs. There were rutted trails dating back to the First World War. This area was denoted on geographical maps as the centre of Death Valley. And a valley of death it was. During our stay of nearly two months in this region, we had not seen any signs of indigenous vertebrae. At midday, when temperatures

rose by a few degrees, the stench coming from the putrid stream was overpowering. One had the constant urge to vomit. Our very existence in that morbid, dreary surrounding was an unrealistic and implausible prodigy.

Yet, in this Death Valley, there were traces of a bygone era, of life having passed through this ancient vale, and having been extinguished, floundering in the inhospitably of its unforgiving topography. In the whirlpool of the rumbling rivulet, amongst the boulders, were carcasses of draught horses, still strapped to their ammunition cars, left over from World War I. Mementos of the old Austro-Hungarian armies, as they tried to advance into the Western Ukraine to do battle with Czarist Russia. A pestiferous stench was the prevailing odour in Death Valley.

The Hungarian Army had set up a disinfection station. No wonder, all of us were hosts to lice. They clung to our clothing, seeking out the warmth of our emaciated bodies. Our only solace was that perhaps the guards, being better nourished than we were, might have been more desirable to the infestation by the parasitic vermin. The sanitary post was near a hamlet called Bresturi, in the Western Ukraine. The day order called for the delousing of all military and ancillary units.

We were aroused as usual at five o'clock. A sleet storm was passing over our site. We received our coffee surrogate and a slice of bread to be shared by six people. On this day we were to receive a hot shower, the first such luxury in close to one and a half years, and our clothes were to be fumigated. A most welcome diversion and relief.

Déry took the roll call in front of the canteen. "Attention, company, march!" We were on our way to the delousing station. We trotted over a rudimentary pontoon

crossing, consisting of a few unhewn trees, wide enough for a small cart, or four men marching abreast. To our left the partially frozen stream, on our right craggy gorges. We marched at a steady, fast pace.

Suddenly, we heard the rumbling of wagons and the clatter of horse's hooves. Hungarian field units and horses pulling artillery pieces retreating from the east were approaching us from the opposite direction. They were fleeing from White Russia and the Pripet marshes.

We edged, single file close to the escarpments, making way for the battle weary units. The horses reared up, frightened at unexpectedly having encountered our company. They veered closer to the mountain stream. Two horses with their flak cannons tumbled into the icy rivulet. The soldiers cursed and were ready to abandon the artillery pieces. We came to the rescue, albeit, unwillingly. We recovered the horses and the anti-aircraft guns. The soldiers were fleeing, regrouping, they had no interest being delayed by equipment problems. We, the poor, raggedy KMSZ had done our share for Hungary, we had recovered valuable war equipment, we had earned our spurs: we deserved to be deloused.

We arrived at the station around eleven o'clock. The post was built on a flat piece of land among a few little shacks and a field hospice housed in a larger structure. There we saw idling soldiers from various units and convalescents lolling around waiting for medical attention. The soldiers spoke to us in a friendly, although patronizing manner.

We entered the delousing hut. Our garments were bundled and taken to the laundry. We entered the showers. Hot water: what a heavenly feeling and the first

time in many months that we had been given bars of soap. We stood under the showers for perhaps fifteen minutes.

We had heard rumour filtering through from Poland that Jews were herded into so-called delousing stations, never to be seen alive. We were apprehensive that this sanitary exercise not be repeated with us. However, our fears were laid to rest as we saw soldiers entering with us into the cleansing facilities. No one could assume that the military would fumigate their own soldiers to extinction.

We had to wait one hour for our clothes. There was no place in the hut for us to wait. We were told to wait outside, stark naked. We were running around on the muddy grounds. The guards found this activity too monotonous. We had to leapfrog around until we looked like mud cakes. We were filthier than before our showers.

Loud cursing and yelling could be heard from inside the hut. A soldier was shouting furiously. "The bloody armbanders have stolen my money." He meant us. A staff sergeant, belonging to an artillery unit, told us sternly, "If you don't return the money immediately, I'll have you machine gunned." He pointed toward the snowy peaks, "You'll run up there naked. If you don't drop the money, we'll shoot you as deserters, you lousy horde!"

We felt terrified and helpless. We could not imagine anyone of us having committed the offence. Furthermore, the bank notes could not have been secreted away in a body aperture. We were at the mercy of the accusers.

A corporal and newly assigned guard stepped forward. He turned to the staff sergeant and declared, "You won't do any such thing. These boys did not steal the money. I'll vouchsafe with my rank for them." It was an unheard of declaration. We had never experienced a guard to defend us. It seemed that our corporal resented the artillery man's interference with his charges.

The other artillery men sneered and jeered at him, "You dare to defend these lousy Jews? You are no better than they are. We'll make you run up the gorges, together with your chums."

Our corporal pulled out his bayonet. "Anyone who wants to shoot me will get this." He was not to be scared by the taunting threats. The soldiers laughed derisively. An ensign intervened. "Stop this stupid bickering, all of you." The soldiers were not ready to simmer down. The ensign declared, "First of all, I'll have you soldiers body searched for the money, and after that we'll get to these naked critters." He meant us. In two minutes they had recovered the stolen money. One of our Mr Instructors had misappropriated it. He was led away, jailed and sentenced to a prison term of one month. The corporal who had defended us, was severely reprimanded for his defiance of a staff sergeant and threatened to be sent on a suicide mission to the frontlines.

We were given our sanitized clothing and assembled for the return to our quarters. On the way back I had to walk bare footed. The trails were covered with heavy mud which would have threatened to detach the soles of my shoes. Treading upon the slimy sediments of the ruddy trails resulted in sliding and gliding movements trying to find a solid foothold.

At dusk we arrived at our work area. We were read the new orders for the following day. Due to the advance of the Red Army, we were to dismantle our spur railroad. Tonight, we had to move our camp northwest. We gathered all our equipment, tools and implements and stumbled through the darkness for five miles.

We finished our chores around midnight. It was too late to prepare shelters within the bushes. It was decided to spend the night in a clearing, trying to sleep on the damp chilly grounds. The temperature was less frigid and after one hour it started to rain heavily.

It would have been foolish to remain prostrate on the miry earth. We sought refuge underneath sprawling trees. We spent the entire night leaning against the arbors. Our clothes were thoroughly soaked. When we grew tired from leaning against the trunks, we clutched the trees for support from a frontal position. It also became tiresome crouching during the rest of the night avoiding to fall upon our haunches.

It was still raining in the morning. For breakfast we received a few mentholated candy drops. We did not have to report for work. The heaven's sluice gates were open. We walked around to our knees in mud. At lunchtime, we received a rain diluted grassy soup.

One of our comrades was a short, timid fellow of orthodox upbringing from a small Transylvanian village. His continuous efforts to restrict his nourishment to kosher precepts made his daily life even more intolerable than ours. He refused all meals which contained meat or lard. He sustained on a diet of bread, greens and berries. We bartered his food for bread. The guards ridiculed and despised him. He claimed to be a younger cousin of a well-known Hollywood producer (Joe Pasternak). One

guard decided to change Pasternak's eating habits. He force-fed him with body lice. Pasternak died within two days.

And the rain continued for two nights and three days.

Nineteen

Company commander Kántor received an unexpected promotion to the rank of first lieutenant. He was to be immediately transferred to an army unit. He bid us farewell. "Men, I'm sorry to leave you. There are some good men among you who would have made good soldiers. But this is fate. We can't help it. I am sure that you will do your best for Hungary. Perhaps in time, the leaders of our nation will realize that they have made a mistake in forcing you to be KMSZ labourers. Keep up the good work and remember, there are soldiers and officers who feel sorry for you and wish you the best. Be strong, don't forget me, and God bless Hungary." We stood at rigid attention while company commander Kántor took our final salute and walked our lines for the last time.

Our new company commander, a young second lieutenant, arrived the next day. He thought that he was on the parade grounds. He came nattily uniformed in an outfit he had paid for himself. Riding boots, a swagger stick under his armpit and white kid gloves on his hands. He was of slight build, blond with a comic opera figure, a coxcomb. He was not the typical officer who would act in a stern and supercilious manner and he was not much older than we.

He tried to establish a rapport with us. He introduced himself as Lieutenant Szillasy, the son of a Transylvanian wine merchant. He mentioned that in his youth he had many Jewish friends. He told us not to worry about our situation. A statement we thought to be utterly ludicrous. However, from further comments we could better understand his philosophy of life. He assured us of his intention and willingness to

procure more food and better treatment. He affirmed his belief that optimism is an essential part of survival. One has to think of good things only. For instance, he had foreknowledge of this, his new assignment. It was not to his liking. Yet, he would not become discouraged. He dressed in his best uniform to raise his own morale. And last but not least, he was always thinking of women. This brought forth an impulsive shout of "Éljen," meaning "Hurray" from our intrepid sex fiend, Barna.

Upon hearing this spontaneous outcry by a soul mate, Lieutenant Szillasy turned to us with a question, "Tell me lads, what would you prefer, a good meal or a good lay?" All of us responded with our preference for a good meal. Szillasy was disappointed. "I can see that you guys are all worn out. Too bad. I wish that I could help you." Only Barna raised his hand. "Any time I'd prefer some of our movie actresses over some food." Szillasy clapped his hands. "What's your name there, you fella?" Everybody responded on his behalf, "Barna, the big tail." Szillasy replied, "Never mind, I like his spirit."

We could understand that. Szillasy had lipstick smeared over his face. He was not aware of it. He told us that he had spent the last two nights with three beautiful hussies in a bedroom at the last civilized village. He had to live it up before his arduous times with us in the Carpathian Mountains.

Many of our comrades were deeply depressed. Rumours, which had not been substantiated were now confirmed by returning soldiers who reported the widespread deportation of Jewish civilians from the Hungarian provinces to concentration death camps. Malnutrition, miserable working conditions, abusive

slave guards and the added worry for their kinfolk had sapped the remaining energy and the will for survival out of our men. They were incapable of further labouring. They followed orders in a fatalistic and lethargic manner. They saw neither hope nor reason for betterment of their lives. Their families were gone and there was no power in the world that would help them.

We lived in a cauldron of world turbulence which was controlled by the Nazis and fascists. Belief and dreams of a better future were now gone in the young. Germany ruled central Europe. Faith, religion nor God would assuage our daily struggles. To think of the illusion of relief was hopeless. The democracies seemed to be impotent and appeared to be indifferent entities.

Yet, there were individuals who had heart and showed compassion. One of these was, as evidenced later on, our playboy company commander. On his last weekly leave of absence, he had met a major from divisional headquarters. They had become drinking companions at a village. Szillasy related to the major the worn out physical state of his KMSZ labourers. He mentioned the impossibility of squeezing any work production from their exhausted, feeble and food-deprived bodies.

Lieutenant Szillasy, the only son of a rich wine merchant father, received a substantial monthly allowance, appanage from his progenitor. This income, which considerably surpassed his army pay provided him with basic personal needs. He was known to enjoy drinks, women and amusements. He was determined to overcome the problem of his present location in the military service.

He suggested to the major that a temporary recuperative withdrawal to the hinterland be granted to his company. Perhaps a short two-week rest in the supply

lines combined with sufficient food rations, would help restore the strength of his labourers. Thereafter, they could once again be utilized to contribute to the war effort.

Szillasy's intimations were not entirely selfless. He wanted to get away from Death Valley. He wanted to enjoy himself again. He missed the company of females. Lieutenant Szillasy casually mentioned the monthly monetary support given to him by his father. The major had gambling debts. Lieutenant Szillasy was willing to extend a gratuitous loan. The major listened. A possible acceptance of a withdrawal request within two weeks was hinted at by his drinking partner, the major.

Close to the high holidays, a member of a small work gang carrying a heavy log was killed. There was a method to lug logs. People had to line up on both sides of the tree trunk. The heaviest part was shouldered by the taller and stronger of the group. The lighter end was borne by the shorter, weaker men. The trees were heavy. Army engineers, or men of the bridge building corps, who were selected for their physical strength, carried the forty-five foot long beams in gangs of twelve.

We, who were weaker and undernourished were to carry these logs in a six-man group. This chicanery, however, did not fully satisfy the spiteful demands of the slave guards. The shortest man was assigned as the leader and carried the heaviest part of the stem. The tallest and strongest fellow was put at the end. In the middle of the lineup were other men of different heights. The shorter men made an effort to grab the logs as well, for they were told that all had to carry the weight equally. This resulted in a disparate weight and height distribution which made the logs sway

on the shoulders of the porters.

Hernádi was detailed to one of these work gangs. A captain of a pioneer unit was strolling by. He was a tall, aristocratic looking fellow wearing glistening black riding boots. He was known to be a graduate of the Ludovika Academy, the officer's training school renown for its demanding discipline and snobbish reputation.

The officer held a cattlewhip in his hand. He chose a few KMSZ men of different heights. He instructed them, "You lads, jump to that log." He pointed to a heavy girder. The fellows tried to lift the beam. Impossible, the weight was too heavy. They strained with all their might. They could not budge the log. The captain cursed and exhorted them, lashing out with his whip. "You don't want to work. I'll show you." He walked up to them and flicking his whip, its leather thongs snapped across the backs and faces of the lads. He squalled at the unfortunate work gang, "When I tell you, 'heave', you heave, and throw the log into the air so high that you will have to jump after it so it doesn't fly away." The fellows bent down again to the log, trying to make the beam fly away, up into the air. The beam only rolled over a few inches, but displayed no other aptitude to become airborne.

The captain could not accept the disobedience of his order. The log had to be moved by the lads. He ordered a squad of twelve pioneers to place the lumber on the shoulders of the smaller work gang. Now hollering, "You lousy obstructionists, run!" The KMSZ fellows ran ten steps. The beam started to roll off their shoulders. They could not hold on to it. Three smaller fellows buckled under the weight of a load intended for twelve husky men.

The three taller slave labourers jumped aside as the girder rolled off their shoulders.

It then knocked two short of stature KMSZ to the ground, banging their heads against boulders. They were rendered unconscious with blood oozing from their mouths, ears and noses. Hernádi, the sixth member of the group was not comatose, he was just dead, skull split open like a crushed watermelon.

A few days later we received the order to withdraw to a recuperative zone, or cordon sanitaire. The destination was two hundred kilometres away in the Eastern Beskides, north of the city of Munkács. Munkács is southwest from the Verecke Pass, a narrow passage in the Carpathian Mountains.

This region, according to semi-authentic sagas, was, in the year 895 AD occupied by the Magyars and under their chieftain, Árpád, they crossed into the former Romanian provinces of Dacia and Pannonia, which later became the kingdom of Hungary. Thus, we were to follow the route taken by the ancient Magyars into Hungarian territory. (Magy-Eri, anent to old Finno-Ugric, or Uralic language, man, human being)

We prepared to return to civilization. Our barber set to work. He was ready to embellish us with a haircut and shave. His implements of trade were in a poor state of readiness to enhance the dexterity of our Figaro. His scissor was missing a rivet to hold its blunted blades together. A rusty, bent nail performed this function in a perfunctory manner, allowing the tool's cutting sides to flap unhappily. The razor was not in a much better condition. The paring edge of the straight knife was serrated, the utensil itself was warped out of shape. Nevertheless, we appreciated the services of our barber-surgeon.

I do mention the dual capacity of our artisan's middle-age craft, for there was bloodletting. He did not have any soap or cream to soften the whiskers of his clients nor did he use tepid water to facilitate shaving. Most of our chaps had blood trickling from their faces after having received this rasping treatment.

Ladányi, one of our guards was in the latrine. As they say in Hungarian, "Whereto even the kings go afoot!" He was crouching at the edge of this public privy, absorbed in his thoughts and engaged in a labourious effort. The latrine, or as we called it, the *latrina magica*, was brim full with scatological deposits. The sidings of the latrine was muddy and slippery.

Ladányi lost his footing and plunged backwards into the ooze of excrements. Terrified of drowning in a swamp of dung, he called for help. We did not accommodate him. For once we thought a guard was in an environment where he rightfully belonged.

A group of our lads were still working in a deep ditch. A whistle sounded for roll call. They did not hear the signal and continued with their work. I advised them to hurry to the assembly place. One of our younger guards, an eighteen year old, approached me and menacingly pointed his rifle. "You there, why do you make the fellows stop working? Who do you think you are?" I told him of the signal for a roll call which had to be obeyed immediately and furthermore that I had not seen him around. He denied the truthfulness of my statements and challenged me with, "You are obstructing work and you are a saboteur." Seeing the astonishment on my face, he continued while aiming his rifle directly at me and placing his finger on the trigger, "I'm going to shoot you right now."

I knew that some of those guards could not be trusted with any sense of logic. Furthermore, most of them were searching for excuses to do away with the KMSZ labourers.

Our appreciation of life had sunk to a low ebb, and we no longer had much faith in our survival, fatalistic attitudes excluded the fear of death. I was searing with blind, reckless rage. I walked right up to him, ignoring the obligatory distance of five feet separating an underling from his superior. I had lost all thoughts of self-preservation and was only filled with the burning desire to smash the head of this illiterate, malicious bumpkin.

Yelling, I said, "Go ahead you dog, try to shoot me!" I gripped the shaft of my pick axe with both hands, looking at the lout intently to see if he would have the nerve to carry out his threat. At the slightest movement of his trigger finger, I was prepared to crush his skull. My decision was definitive. If I was going to be shot, at least I would attempt to take him with me. The yokel was taken aback by my sudden challenge. This was the first time that a labourer would have threatened the life of a guard. He lowered his rifle. At that very moment another urgent second signal was sounded for the company to assemble. We rushed to follow the order for a roll call. While passing by me, the young dolt remarked, "All right, all right, I just wanted to scare you for telling the guys what to do. I didn't hear the assembly call." Sneeringly I responded, "Any time you want to shoot at me, let me know in advance." He did not reply.

We cleaned and polished our shovels, spades and pick axes. We scrubbed our eating utensils, cups and spoons to a sparkling shimmer. We lined up in four platoons to be read the day's order. It was the great day, the day of our company's

withdrawal to the safe zone.

The company's equipment was loaded onto two horse-drawn carts. Two of the kitchen's two hundred twenty-five pound kettles were to be carried by four men on poles. Our dandy Lieutenant Szillasy cleared his voice and lectured us, "Listen men, we are travelling to a territory inhabited by civilian population. Act like civilized people. Don't bring shame upon me."

It had come that far. We were no longer considered as beings who would know how to comport themselves in a civilized environment. We were thought of as quasi-animals, inhabitants of remote forests and mountains. On the other hand, it seemed challenging to arrive at an unaccustomed surrounding where civilians behaved in strange ways to which we would have to grow accustomed to.

We were served our usual grassy soup. We shouldered our tools. The guards squalled and cursed. The preparations were in place and the proper ambiance was achieved. We marched out of Death Valley with a song, a sentimental one at that on our lips, "My sweetheart, she lives on the crest of the Carpathians..." ...to hell with the Carpathians we thought, good riddance.

Our marching orders were changed a tad. Instead of reaching Munkács by the Verecki Pass, we were to cross into the Carpatho-Ukraine through the Tatár Pass and detour to the city of Chust (Khust), the principal town of that region. This circuitous route meant that we were to be on the road for a least twelve days.

On the second day of our plodding advance and after having trudged through a heavy downpour, we were descending into an all-encompassing, seemingly viscous,

milky-white cloud blanket. The opaqueness of the whirling vapour layers impeded vision beyond the length of our marching columns. The shrouded environment created the illusion of walking above and into a mass of unfathomable dimensions.

On this occasion, the weight of my spade, resting against my shoulder, became an intolerable burden. My weakened body, low spirits, equalling our sense of ephemeral existence, could no longer muster enough strength to drag myself along. Every step required a gasping effort. It was then that I decided to breach army regulations and rid myself of the implement the Hungarian Army had entrusted to me. The cloud covers and curtailed visibility were all helpful adjuncts when with a great sense of relief, I tossed my spade into the all engulfing vapid cloud formations.

The guards had not seen my severely punishable contravention of army rules, nor did I perceive the direction of my spade as it tumbled into a cumulus layer. I felt immense release at having rid myself of the tool which was part of my three-year long arduous exertions to help in the war effort. Symbolically I had a sense of reprieve from further labour.

It was the first week of October, 1944. We finally had passed down to the foothills of the Carpathians. Here, it was still late Autumn, the sun shone benevolently and nature displayed a milder, more forgiving and invigorating disposition. The air was crisp and the trees were reluctantly shedding their leaves. We were fortunate to have arrived in time to see this unexpected display of beauty.

Walnuts and multicoloured apples, ripe for picking, were hanging from the tree branches. We were not allowed to linger and partake in harvesting these God-sent

fruits. Yet, we could not be prevented from acquiring a small reserve of the badly needed nourishment by peppering the trees with stones, and gathering the nourishing yield.

My haversack was brimming with this unforeseen crop. However, I could not freely munch on it. For months we were deprived of fruits and essential vitamins which are required in a normal diet. Ours was a starvation regimen. Consequently I was suffering from a severe affliction of scurvy. My gums were swollen and constantly bleeding. My teeth were so loose that they had become pliant to the touch of my tongue. I was incapable of chewing or tearing solid food into digestible bites. My teeth had become rubber-like and I had to make an effort to not grind them together as they would detach themselves from their frail base.

At midday, we came to a halt. We received our watery soup and it was now time to occupy ourselves with our nature-bestowed food bounty. I opened the shells of the walnuts and on a flat stone, ground the interior to a soft mush. I cut the apples into small pieces with a pen knife and mashed them to a delicious pulp. Devouring these nutrients I felt as if my body was soaking up strength like a dry sponge would revitalize itself with badly needed water.

In the afternoon, we arrived at a small village. Company commander, Lieutenant Szillassy ordered us to assemble in the village square around a table by which he was seated. He wore his white kid gloves and declared with a wide smile, "Fellows, you've worked hard without pay for a very long time. This was no news to us. However, what he said next came as news, "You haven't received army pay for over one year." As we listened with interest to where these preambles might lead, he concluded, "Today is the big day. We are going to shell out your army pay."

This was quite unexpected. Considering that we had been treated worse than animals, starved to tottering feebleness, we could hardly envisaged a monetary reward. Nevertheless, here it was. We received one month's salary in Hungarian currency and did not have the faintest idea what we could buy with these bloody wages.

From the end of the square, surveying the distribution of our bonanza, was a group of young women. At first, we had no idea what their interest was in these proceedings. As we were on our way out of the village, they thronged close to us and cried out, with traces of empathy, "Poor fellows, it's a shame what they are doing to you." We took a closer look at them. They were camp followers, harlots, who eyed us with pity. Some of them yelled, "Hey, you poor guys, want to have a good time? Come to us, we'll give it to you for free."

Our guards did not like this generosity offered to us for free when they, the valiant ones, would have to pay for the pleasure. A fairly attractive blond prostitute in her thirties turned to one of our fellows, while cupping her ample breasts, "Come to me handsome, skinny skeleton, I'll nurse you back to health like my first baby. I have plenty of milk for you." It so happened that the fellow, whom she had taking a liking to, would not bring himself to suckle on her well-endowed breasts, for he was a religious chap who could not recall any biblical precepts condoning such actions.

The women however seemed sincere in their feelings. They berated the guards, telling them, "We wouldn't give it to you even if you'd pay us a fortune. We'd rather sleep with these poor guys." Regardless of the merits and prospects of sleeping with these tarts, which would have been against racial laws, we were touched by the warmth of their humane feelings.

After one week of less physical exertion and being limited to only the demands of our daily twenty to thirty kilometre marches, we arrived at the outskirts of Chust. Our daily soup had been fortified with bits of meat and our overall well-being had improved. This was due in no small measure to the supplement of walnuts and apples we had snatched on the road one week ago. The condition of my teeth had improved to such a degree that I was capable of eating solid food and the scurvy was regressing.

We were given a two day rest period in the Chust area. This morning, together with another comrade, we ventured into a cottage of a Carpatho-Ukrainian, attempting to buy bread. Lieutenant Szillassy had given us permission to buy rations from the inhabitants with our army pay.

It was 15 October, 1944 and only gradually did we learn of the momentous events which were to unfold on this very day.

Our host, an electrician, welcomed us with eagerness into his home. He showed us into the bedroom. There we found a radio which we quickly gathered around. He told us that an announcement to the Hungarian nation was to be broadcast by Regent Admiral Horthy. We then heard Horthy's message delivered in a firm voice. He called for an end to the Hungarian participation in the war and spoke of an armistice agreement reached between his emissaries in Moscow and the Soviet government, which would put an end to the suffering and tragic loss of Hungarian lives.

A call went out for the immediate cessation of hostilities. Further instructions to the armed forces would be forthcoming. The nation was asked to remain calm in the

face of a possible adverse reaction by Germany and to trust the leadership of, and unite around Admiral Hóthy. We could hardly believe our ears. This meant a possible end to our travails.

The Ukrainian fiddled around with the knobs of his receive shortwave radio. Civilians were not allowed to own this type of apparatus which could broadcast foreign stations. Our host, his wife, their two children and the group of us were sitting in silent anticipation as we heard the sounds of Big Ben and the BBC's Hungarian broadcast in London confirming Hóthy's message which was disseminated only minutes ago. This broadcast gave a further synopsis of the possible ramifications of this altered political situation for Hungary and the changed military perspectives.

The BBC's announcer gave a summary of the present political state of affairs and informed his listeners of the newest military movements in various theatres of combat. All of these tidbits of intelligence came to us as revelations. We, who had been cut off from civilization, had no knowledge of the activities in the wider central European lands.

The announcer's voice delivered his message in a deep, yet reassuring baritone inflection and enunciated a series of events. The Soviets had invaded the Hungarian territory on 7 October, Soviet Marshal Rokossovsky, whose armies had contributed significantly to the defeat of German armies around Stalingrad in 1943, and the surrender of German Field Marshal Paulvs, had advanced into Poland.

Marshals Zhukov, also of Stalingrad fame, together with Marshal Koniev, were pushing into central and southern Poland. Marshal Timoshenko, the commander of

the powerful and indomitable T34 tank whose armour seemed imperious to shelling, had successfully counter-attacked in the Ukraine and was advancing into the Balkans. Marshal Tolbukhin's third Ukrainian front, was helping Yugoslavia's Marshal Tito, liberate his capital, Belgrade, and was in the process of advancing north to unite with Marshal Malinovsky's second Ukrainian front, who was about to burst into southern Hungary.

The BBC announcer ended his message with an intimation that the collapse of the Nazi war machine was imminent and just as the German V12 rockets "retribution weapons" (Vergeltungswaffen) launched from Peenemünde on the Baltic Sea, against Great Britain, were unable to turn the tide in Germany's favour, no other efforts by the Nazis could prevent their ultimate defeat. To us, these last declarations seemed to be of a bombastic and premature nature, considering that we still felt the might of Nazi Germany in central Europe and saw no signs of diminution in their resolve and fanaticism to carry on with the war.

We were in a daze from all the mind-boggling news we just had heard and had difficulty comprehending all the vistas which were before us. We thanked our Ukrainian host for his hospitality in allowing us to share in the confidential radio message. He was as much thrilled by all the good news as we were and invited us to return the next day to listen to hopefully, more good news.

That evening we saw a radical change in the attitude of our guards. They tried to be chummy with us, explaining that over the years they had as difficult time as we had serving in a KMSZ battalion, and that they bore no grudges against us. They were recruited into this service against their will and against their better judgement. A very likely story. This evening, they no longer addressed us with denigrating

epithets, they now called us comrades.

Due to the changed political situations and probably new marching directives, our departure from Chust had been delayed for three days. On 18 October, we once again had the opportunity to drop in on our friend, the Ukrainian electrician. After pulling the shades of his bedroom windows, he motioned us to sit around his cherished shortwave radio and searched for the familiar and much appreciated BBC station.

After overcoming static interference and the sounds of German radio interceptors, we managed to listen to news from London which came through in faint signals. Dramatic events had taken place on 16 October. The Germans, upon hearing Horthy's attempts to disassociate Hungary from the Axis powers had taken immediate countermeasures.

Sturmbannführer (Major) SS Otto Skorzeny was dispatched in command of a parachute battalion to the Citadel of Buda, where Admiral Horthy was guarded by loyal Hungarian army units and parachutists. A short-lived, fierce battle ensued between the German parachutists and loyal Hungarian troops, which resulted in the rout of the Hungarians and the kidnapping of Horthy by Skorzeny.

This was another extraordinary feat by Skorzeny who seemed to lead a charmed life and who extolled in carrying out daring exploits in the service of the Führer. He was the man who, in September 1943, at the head of glider plane assault troops, landed at the highest peak of the northern Abruzzi Apennine mountain where the Duce was being held prisoner by the rebellious King of Italy and waiting for loyal fascist troops to rescue him. It was Skorzeny who successfully whisked him away and it was the

same audacious Major Skorzeny who substantially contributed in squelching the General's complot against Hitler's life in July, 1944.

On the day of Horthy's capture, the Germans installed a new Hungarian government under the leadership of the obsequious, Nazism-adoring scamp Ferenc Szálesi, chieftain of the rabid Arrowcross party. The defacto governing of Hungary was in the hands of SS General Dr Veessenmayer.

The installation of the riff-raff Arrowcross government abruptly terminated our illusions for betterment in our situation. The guards reverted to their old abusive ways which, only the remedying hand of Lieutenant Szillassy could keep in check.

After a few days we left the city of Chust. On our way to the city of Munkács we passed through the villages of Bjeli Mokra and Nênci Mokra. These settlements, although within Hungarian suzerainty, were inhabited by minority Germans, in the Hungarian parlance called Swabians who, being of proud and self-assertive German nationality, disclaimed any adherence to Hungarian statehood or language.

Now that Germany had installed a puppet regime in Budapest, these fervent Nazi followers displayed signs of local autonomy. The reeve's building showed a huge swastika flag and an even larger picture of their adored Führer. The Hungarian national flag was replaced by that of The Reich. No signs in the Hungarian language were visible, only an abundance of German slogans, exhorting the populace to work for the Thousand Year Empire. A prominent billboard displayed the assertion, *Mit unserem Führer zum Sieg*, (with our leader to victory). The Hungarian military grumbled at these signs of defiance and contempt for their authority, but could do little about it.

We then passed through a Hungarian village. There, from the roof of the tallest building, hung a colossal picture of the new Hungarian dictator, Szálasi. Company commander, Lieutenant Szillassy rode in front of our columns on a white mare which he had requisitioned. Suddenly he called for us to halt. He veered to our right and facing the picture of Szálasi, he took our salute while ordering in a stentorian voice, "Company, eyes to the right, spit out to the left!" We followed these orders with gratifying pleasure.

A Wehrmacht sergeant approached our company commander and demanded to know whether we had a medic or veterinarian in our ranks. A supply unit of the soldiers had a health problem with one of their horses. This was on the approaches of Munkács which we had attained after another three days. We released our third-year medical student, Kabos, to attend to the ill horse. By all indications, the horse was in no condition to contribute to the war effort.

Kabos touched the animal with circumspection, noticing that it was in an uncooperative mood. It whinnied pitifully and tried to rear on its hind legs. One soldier held on to the bridle as another tried to pacify the beast while Kabos attempted to insert a thermometer into its anus. The horse, a stallion, refused this intrusion with a mixture of indignation and horror by shaking its head athwart in an askance manner. Another of our comrades by the name of Vajda, a horse trainer back home, intervened.

He gently talked into the horse's ear, convincing the animal that nothing untoward was about to happen with the medical instrument stuck in its rear. Vajda had a way with horses whom, admittedly, he liked more than people. His soothing voice and whispered message calmed down the animal. This enabled Kabos to perform his

medical examination, establishing that the horse had a severe viral infection with an accompanying high fever. Consultations between our medic and horse trainer comrades resulted in curative advice to be followed by the German soldiers.

The German soldiers appreciated the apparent know-how and suggestions by our comrades and offered in return gratuitous pats of approbations. The stallion seemed less appreciative of Kabos, for when he perceived our medic-cum-vet in his proximity, he succeeded in forcefully swatting him across the face with his tail. Kabos confessed thereafter, a stronger preference for human patients.

The next day, it seemed we could not get away from our perennial road repairing chores. We halted next to the banks of a brook and were told to gather stones and small rocks for road repairs. On the other side of the knee-high rivulet was a wooden hovel, from where a decrepit looking anile woman motioned me to enter her abode.

She seemed to be a good natured person and upon entering her small, wretched, one room clay floor hut, offered me a bowl of warm milk and a mash of hot maize. She refused to accept monetary recompense. She shook my hand repeatedly and upon parting wished me, in broken Hungarian, a long life and good luck. It seemed that one ought not generalize, there were good people among all nationalities.

At the end of October, 1944, we had advanced to the railroad hub of Csap. A small town, near a small stream. We were lodged in the hay loft of a large barn. At this time I experienced a bad bout of dyspepsia and a subsequent attack of dysentery. Many of my comrades were suffering from the same condition. According to Kabos, the changeover from a starvation diet to a more regular consumption of sufficient

food had overwhelmed our systems to the extent of precluding the retention of food.

I could not stand on my feet and was bedridden, or perhaps better expressed, clay floor ridden, with a high temperature. My resting spot was in a corner on the ground floor, next to the barn's exit. This was a good location and a sheltered one as I was soon to find out.

During the night there was a constant procession to the latrines which, the fellows lodged in the hay loft, tried to reach with speed, by scampering down a wobbly ladder. They readied themselves to expedite their bodily functions by removing their pants as they slid down the rungs and poles of the wooden structure.

Their intentions were well meant, however maladroitly executed, as in many instances, the fellows were unable to control their bowel movements and unwillingly for sure, emptied the contents of their intestines upon their sleeping comrades on the ground floor. Observing the ensuing hubbub, I considered myself lucky to be in my protected area where I was not exposed to scatological threats.

My health condition deteriorated. I could hardly stand and only with great effort could I grope my way out of the shelter to accommodate myself. My comrades were of little help to me. A good portion of our company was barely mobile and the others, capable of work, were doing their chores near the waters.

I trudged down to the stream and sipped some of the dirty water to quench my thirst and ease the heat flowing through my body. The drink had done me no good. The taste of the water was pungent and I felt worse than before. I floundered back to the barn with buckling knees and plopped into my corner. Fever had apparently

taken hold of me more severely after my trip to the edge of the stream.

I started hallucinating. I felt that something ought to give me solace, that I had to overcome my incapacity. I felt stabbing pains around my chest. I started rubbing my ribs, and suddenly I realized that something, or was it the *something* I had searched for was with me? Could it be that I was carrying, without ever having given much thought to it, an amulet, a talisman that would help and protect me? Could it really be? Yes, tucked away in the buttoned up breast pocket of my shirt was the good luck charm, blessed by the Pope and given to me by Mrs Nyikora, so it seemed a long time ago. The amulet, bearing the semblance of Hungary's patron saint, Elizabeth would protect me. This naive, yet comforting thought stayed with me until I fell into a deep and laboured slumber.

Kabos administered a chinine-like compound to me which reduced the fever and alleviated dysentery allied pain. After two days, I was back on my feet.

In a shack adjacent to the barn were a row of benches and an old wooden chest. While recuperating from my illness, I sat down, opened the box and started rummaging through it. I found some torn and tattered books, envelopes and a picture postcard. In hardly legible writing, washed-out and faded by weather and the passing of time, I could decipher a note, dating back to the end of Word War I and written by a soldier to a certain Therese Abraham in Hungary. I was dumbfounded. This was the maiden name of my mother. I strained my eyes to read the words which had the appearance of hieroglyphics. It was only a coincidence.

The name was my mother's but it was addressed and never sent away to the woman. Nevertheless, this had a mystical effect on me. It created the notion of having received a message from my mother to carry on and not to submit to despair and hopelessness. I wrapped the card in some old newspaper pages and placed it next to the blessed amulet, in the belief that perhaps in spite of thoughts of fetishism, that these objects might bring luck.

The company received marching orders to regroup with our battalion in Kassa at an approximate distance of one hundred kilometres. Provisions were made for a small contingent of ailing comrades, together with an accompaniment of six guards to ride in open freight wagons of a train, carrying construction materials and equipment belonging to an artillery regiment heading for the same destination.

The selection process for this salutary means of transportation was a contentious one as quite a number of simulators professed being incapacitated to undertake the strenuous road trip. Kabos rejected the unjust solicitations and picked a group of twenty KMSZ colleagues whom he deemed medically unfit for the march.

Included in this unit were the battalion's scribe, a tailor, our barber, three religious fellows, five chaps from Budapest, four fellows from the Carpathian regions, our assistant cook, two non-descript novices, our horse trainer and myself. The horse trainer, albeit an illiterate peasant was not as doltish as one would have assumed. A short while ago, before the screening of the sick he was hale and hearty. It seemed that he had caught wind of the train ride eligibility and swallowed some herbs which rendered him ill with signs of an unexpected attack of epilepsy.

Kabos, amused by Vajda's playacting and also convinced that after a speedy recovery the horse trainer could become a motivating leader, consented to his inclusion with our ailing troop.

We bid our company good bye while the feelings of a final farewell grew stronger in us. The reshuffling of manpower into other units was a constant procedural element of the military. It was quite possible that, before the arrival of our company in Kassa, we would be reassigned to another outfit, or army group.

We were temporarily placed under the command of a stern and raucous, professional artillery master sergeant, who was in charge of the supply train. Just before boarding the train, Lieutenant Szillassy performed one more of his altruistic deeds. "Fellows," he said, "knowing, how much you look forward to meeting with us in Budapest, after Kassa," and there he paused, while winking at us, "I'll have an immediate safe conduct letter drawn up for all of you and the guards, which travel papers should guarantee you unhindered passage to the capital." We looked at Szillassy with amazement. If we had searched our mind to come up with a better solution for escaping from our slave labour environment, we could not have devised a better scheme.

Szillassy had no authorization to issue a safe conduct letter, yet, he took a calculated risk that no repercussions would befall him for his humanistic effort. Our company and battalion were rumoured to regroup in Budapest, but like much of the unsubstantiated gossip this was based only on wishful thinking.

Nevertheless, we all knew that it was easier to desert and acquire false identity papers in the capital than anywhere else. Szillassy himself had confided to some of

us that he was determined to get to Budapest and shed his army uniform. He was not a sympathizer of the Fascists.

Our small group of twenty men and six guards assembled and took a final farewell march in front of Szillassy, attempting in spite of our infirm condition, to put as much military grit as possible into our faltering steps, showing Lieutenant Szillassy our enthusiastic thanks.

I had a premonition that from hereon in my fate would have to be guided more than ever by good luck and my own initiatives.

Book Two

Twenty

It was a gloomy, overcast November 1944 afternoon. We were assembled in front of the railway station as frigid winds whipped rain-swollen clouds across a leaden-grey sky which soaked our small group with an abundance of its water-pregnant vapour formations.

A long line of cattle box cars were coupled to a coal tender of a stationary oversized locomotive which impatiently huffed and puffed belching glowing cinders disdainfully around the area. We were given the signal to mount the open coal tender while our guards sought shelter in the elevated cabin of the adjacent front caboose.

The coal was piled high in the tender and we were sitting on top of an ever-shifting mound of coal which had a tendency to roll over the planks and onto the ground. "Hey you guys up there, don't sit around like helpless toads, shovel the coal about!" It was the train's engineer standing next to the locomotive's white hot boiler jawing and glaring at us. "Yeah, Mr Engineer, right away, we'll dig into the coal with our bare hands, or what the hell?" "Wait just a moment you big mouths, I can help you," said the brave engineer, and now he tossed ten heavy coal shovels up to us, which he fetched from the bin.

We were precariously sitting on the restive coal pile desperately burrowing our hands into the mound in an attempt to not slither with the coal over the planks of the wagon. Now with scoops provided, we started to pile the coal even higher, while at the same time clearing a dugout for ourselves, close to the sides of the wooden planking. After a laborious half hour effort, we found a secure footing. The

engineer looked at us with a broad smile of amusement. Pelting rain, mixed with coal dust ran down our faces in grimy droplets, turning us into jerkily moving scarecrows.

Nevertheless, we had to be content with being allowed to travel by freight train. The engineer yelled up to us, "Fellas, get ready, we'll be moving out!" He pulled the chain of the locomotive's whistle and a long hooting sound gave notice of our departure. The engine noisily pulled out of the train station with a heavy swish of hot steam emanating from its funnel as the freight cars reluctantly followed.

Later, the engineer clamoured again for attention, "Throw me down some coal for the furnace, it's hungry as hell." And our guards, sitting cozily in their observation dome, chimed in, "Yeah, you guys, work a little, earn your keep and be happy to be on the train!" With these encouragements, we heaved clumps of coal down to the boiler. "Hey, not so much, not so much damn you!" It was the master of the train again, this time complaining, "Do you want to bury me alive with all this frigging coal?" and snorting some more, "I have no place to stand in my cabin." We saw that we could not do well by him. "A little bit, a little bit only, and then only when I call for it!" So we followed his instructions and waited for his further orders, or laments.

In the evening, while the cloud bursts still continued, the train came to a grinding halt. We were in the foothills of the mountain approaches to Kassa. We were told that we would be stationary for at least one day while waiting for additional box cars and other locomotives to be coupled to our transport.

Two of our guards were gypsies whose native village was only a few kilometres from our present site. They asked our commanding guard, a sergeant, for permission to visit their homes. They were given a half day leave. The gypsies bid us a joyful goodbye and even embraced us while confiding that they were always on our side and did not enjoy having bossed us around for they were also treated as outcasts by the military.

Presently, we were no longer required to feed the hungry furnace with more coal and for this reason were given authorization to transfer from the tender to open freight wagons. I found one box car, crammed full of wooden beams, bags of cement and sand, rolls of tar paper and wheel barrows, which appeared to me like a wondrous, solitary abode where I could hopefully spend a peaceful night, away from the guards and the complaints of my comrades.

The rain continued in buckets. It was dark all along the marshy fields and a cold wind blew from the mountains encircling our immobile train. The guards, artillery men and our group had fallen asleep and only the flickering lights of oil lanterns and wood-burning stoves signified the presence of humans.

I took a roll of tar paper and spread it over a wheel barrow which I had turned upside down and moved to the well of the wagon. I crouched under this shelter with knees pulled to my chest, waiting for the rain to stop. The water began to rise in the wagon and not wanting to sit in a puddle, I transferred my makeshift dwelling to the top of stacked wooden beams. Although I was more exposed to the driving wind, at least I was no longer sitting in a pool of water.

This morning brought no relief from the inclement weather. I had not eaten for a full day. I climbed down the planks of the wagon and, walking a few metres to the side of a steep bluff, saw spring water gushing down the sides. I refilled my field flask and was happy to wash down the bitter taste of rotting bog permeating the air.

At noon, I approached the wagon of the guards enquiring about food. "There's none for you guys," said the sergeant, while stuffing his mouth with corned beef which he ladled from a tin can. "When are we going to get some food?" asked one of my comrades. "Don't ask so many God-damn questions," replied the masticating guard. "We did not draw any meals for you because we were supposed to arrive in Kassa yesterday. It's not our fault that the train is slow."

We grumbled and all to no avail. Noticing the reproachful glances we cast at their ample rations, they admonished us to get back to our wagons, lay low, get some sleep and dream of having full bellies.

In the afternoon, our sergeant was excitedly yelling to the guards, "Where the hell are those stinking gypsies?" He was referring to the guards who were given a half day leave and were tardy in their return. No one had an explanation. Thus, the sergeant who was responsible for their presence, shouldered his rifle and ordered two of his underlings to accompany him to the gypsy hamlet. One hour later they returned without the absentees.

The other guards huddled around the trio and were told that upon entering the village they were met by a group of elderly women who were wailing and moaning loudly, tearing their already tattered clothing to shreds. They were clawing at their faces until blood was streaming down their cheeks and were screaming curses and

reproaches at them. "Why didn't you big, shitty heroes come before? You should have saved our sons from the blood-thirsty field gendarmes!" "What the hell are you screeching about?" asked the sergeant. "The rotten Hungarian field gendarmes came here, asked our sons to show them papers. They didn't have any proof that they had permission to be here. Then," and the gypsy women raised their voices to an unbearable pitch, "they said you dirty gypsies are deserters."

The village's elder, a bent and grizzled, white-haired gypsy, leaning on a shepherd's crook, lead our guards to a clearing. There, on a tree, dangling on long ropes by their ankles were the bodies of the two gypsy soldiers. The women started cursing the guards again, "God show no mercy to these animals. Kill them all and all their womenfolk."

The sergeant ordered his men to cut the bodies loose and bring them back to the train. The gypsy elder intervened. "The gendarmes told us to leave our sons on the gallows for three days as a warning to others. If we don't listen, they would shoot a few among us." The women did not stop caterwauling. The sergeant scoured the surroundings for the gendarmes. He wanted to lay charges against them. The murderers could not be found. Our guards were distressed. This was the first time that their colleagues had died for the Hungarian Motherland.

We were informed that the arrival of the additional train would be delayed by at least another day. "When are we finally going to get some grub?" asked one of our comrades. "We don't know, and we ain't worrying about it either," said the guards. "You don't work now, so you don't need food. Get back to your wagons." Our questions about food made them hungry. They opened a large wooden chest and helped themselves to a few tins of canned food.

I returned to my shelter. The water in the wagon had drained off. Still, everything was wet. I replaced the tar paper and crawled underneath the wheel barrow. My stomach growled and cramped from hunger. The thoughts of food did not leave my mind. A sudden decision, I had to get one of the cans of provisions the guards were monopolizing for themselves. Desperation overcame caution and shame. I had never pilfered anything before. The demands for self-preservation were stronger than any scruples.

It was after midnight. No sign of activity, only the intermittent hiss of steam escaping from the locomotive's funnel. This noise was to be taken advantage of. Cautiously, I lowered myself from the planks of the wagon. It was down the line in the fifth box car where the precious food was stored. I listened for voices or other evidence indicating a vigil by the guards. They were evidently all asleep. Warily I swung myself over the sides of the wagon and noticed, in the murkiness of the night, the snoring bodies of two supine guards. The strongbox was next to them. I hunkered down for a moment. All seemed fine, the trunk was open. The cans were under a thin tarpaulin. I tore away the protective cover and just as I was ready to help myself to some cans, one of the guards started stirring and mumbling under his breath. I pressed myself against the floor of the wagon and waited for a moment. Quiet again, the guard was still. It was too risky however to wait any longer. I grabbed a one kilogramme can of stuffed green peppers. The other cans were jammed in the box. I did not want to make noise by prying them loose. One can was better than none.

Prudently I climbed over the planking and rushed to my shelter happily clutching the food. A flippant thought occurred to me, "There must be a God who knew that I liked stuffed green peppers."

However, there was a slight problem. How was I to open this can without a knife or other implement? Looking around, I found a possible solution. The grip of the wheel barrow had a jagged metal support pin which could be used.

The other consideration was to avoid making noise. Fortunately, the locomotive's swishing sound muffled my efforts as I was slamming the can against the wheel barrow's jutting metal prong. It took ten minutes to rip the can open. Now, finally, the delectable food was to be savoured and not devoured. For a half hour I munched on the contents. The rest I kept for another day. I hid the can under some cement bags and I felt happy and relaxed in no small measure due to not having been detected.

The clouds seemed to carry an inexhaustible volume of rain which fell inexorably onto our area. Everyone stayed inside his wagon. Daybreak, however gave the environment a degree of relief from its turbid depression.

My comrades were suffering from hunger. At least I still had some of the canned food. I gobbled it up at noontime. Afterwards, I threw the empty, incriminating tin into a deep gully, drained by a fast flowing creek, next to the railway tracks.

The hours passed slowly. I sat under my wheel barrow tar paper canopy and mulled over the discouraging situation which, after these untenable years of slave labour, held few prospects for improvement.

The German and allied fascist armies still held sway over large territories. Their military resistance, as their domain seemed to shrink, became more resolute and destructive. In case of further setbacks they would turn their fury of vengeance

against the most vulnerable segments of society, the Jews, the gypsies, the Slavs and other undesirables who did not fit into their idolized scheme of the German super race.

I had no false identity papers which could facilitate a break for freedom. Furthermore, we were in an area where I knew no one and could not count on shelter from strangers. I had no money and no food lay in store. Another attempt at stealing more cans of provisions was too risky. The first time I was just lucky.

I felt downcast and forlorn. I glanced around in the wagon and only saw useless construction material. I felt like a vapid and shallow object. In the corner of the freight car was an old wooden chest. I sensed a tinge of curiosity to verify its contents. Certainly there would be no food in its interior. The box was not locked. It was crammed full with a trove of faded, soaked books. I rummaged through the pile for legible, interesting literature. However, I found only Hungarian romances.

God knows who wanted to salvage this slush. But look, could it be, there was one book in German, written by Ludwig Anzengruber, the nineteenth century dramatist who so vividly described Austrian village life. It was *der G'wissenswurm* (the remorse carper), the humorous book written in the Austrian peasant vernacular. It was the same work we had discussed a long time ago at the Realgymnasium (high school), in Vienna.

I was flushed with joy. I retired to my lean-to and while huddling under my shelter, started reading with eager anticipation. A thunderous rain storm swept through the area, flooding the wagon with cold rain and I was immersed in the therapeutic literature which brought back memories of a happy childhood. As I read on I was

transmuted into the past, the intense feeling of belonging, of being a part of Austrian society. A sense of security emerged and sublimated my subconscious with a glow of recurring confidence in my inner strength. A psychological metamorphosis took hold of me.

The memories of the last few painful years seemed to sink into oblivion and the present difficult circumstances were losing their pervading solemnity. I read until dusk rendered the pages illegible. By midnight, the additional freight cars had still not arrived. We were waiting in the same location without food. Yet, the pangs of hunger were diminished by the fond memories Anzengruber's book had evoked.

In the afternoon of the next day we received the order to move on to Kassa where another train, consisting of thirty box cars and carrying men and equipment of an entire artillery regiment would be coupled to our transport.

Late in the evening, we arrived at the railway shunting yard of Kassa. The rains had not subsided. I was thoroughly drenched and had to wring the water out of my clothes. We were summoned to assemble in front of the master sergeant's wagon. Our curiosity was soon answered, as he appeared in the door of his box car and with a benevolent smile declared, "You guys haven't eaten for four days. If you were smart, you'd have packed away some slices of bread or some other chow when we left Chap. But, I don't think that you were smart enough, because normally you are stupid and think that the guards have to feed you."

This lengthy monologue did not alleviate our hunger. But noticing our blank stares, he added, "It could be that your guards did not treat you well all the time, but we, artillery men, are different. You were put under my command, and I won't let you

keel over from hunger." He motioned to one of his enlisted men who brought forth a large chest from which he handed each of us a half loaf of bread and a palm-sized chunk of bacon. We were thrilled to no end. I withdrew with my treasure to the box car, crawled underneath my shelter and contentedly munched on the unexpected repast.

It was night again. Silence had settled upon our transport. From a few hundred metres down the railway lines, came the fickle reflection of flapping tongues of flames. They emanated from a switchman's shanty. My clothes were saturated by the unending rain. As much as I tried to wring them dry, the clammy humidity stuck to my body. I decided to steal down to that shack. I peeked through the wooden cabin's soot covered window and saw in the empty room the burning fire of a glowing metal stove. The door unlocked. I entered. I rubbed my hands over the consoling heat of the burner and gradually removed my exterior garments, shoes and the wet, torn foot rags. I stood there in my underwear and let the comforting heat prickle my skin and sooth my frayed nerves.

The door opened abruptly and the gruff voice of the railroad worker brought me jarringly back to reality. "What in blazes are you doing here? Who the hell gave you the right to break into my cabin?" "Well," I countered, "there's no one here and warming myself a little would not do any harm." And with this explanation I gathered up my clothes and sat down on a stool, next to the stove.

The elderly man, puzzled by my presence, insisted on enquiring who I was. He relaxed somewhat, however when I informed him that our small group was travelling with the artillery detachment and were required to assist them in their transfer. He scratched his head pensively and musingly said, "You guys are really

lucky. I've seen a number of trains with Jews passing by here, going north to Poland, to death camps, so I've been told."

This information was unsettling. Our only chance to avoid deportation was in maintaining our association with the artillery men. Furthermore, the switchman could not be trusted. He might inform field gendarmes of our presence who, in turn would attempt to accuse the military of sheltering us. I had better get back to the train. The old man seemed to be of like mind. "Dry your rags and get out of here. I don't want to get into trouble." He was not being hateful, he only feared for his own hide. The train had stopped. I was back in my wagon stretched out on my bedstead of wooden planks and tried to catch some sleep.

At dawn I was jolted from a restive slumber by the clanging sound of freight-cars being coupled to our train. Finally, our transport had its full complement. We were summoned to the master sergeant's car. "You guys," he said, "will help me move my furniture from my cottage to the train." We were baffled a little by this order, however an explanation followed. "Our regiment's headquarters are to be moved close to the Austrian border. All staff personnel is also moving there, kit and caboodle." If we could stay with him all the way, the chances of escaping to Budapest would be more promising. It was in our interest to please Master Sergeant Hajdu.

"Yes Sir, Mr Master Sergeant, we'll move your furniture and we'll take care not to scratch any." This unsolicited assurance seemed to gladden Hajdu. All twenty of us marched to his cottage which was in a new section of Kassa, reserved primarily for army personnel and state functionaries. Before we set out, Hajdu lined us up and said, "You fellas, remove your God-damn armbands. I don't want anyone to know

that I'm bothering with KMSZ guys." We were only too glad to oblige and stuck the despised bands into our pockets. Strangely enough, this symbolic act made us feel freer. Our guards would have never countenanced such an order which contravened army ordinances.

We arrived at the sergeant's neat, whitewashed cottage. At its threshold impatiently waiting was Hajdu's fat and shrewish wife along with an equally obese, shaggy sheep dog. We loaded all of their furniture, together with an ancient harmonium onto three large wooden carts, while Mrs Hajdu watched us with Argus-like eyes. The sun started to break through the morning haze. We were pulling our loads on the poorly paved roads toward the shunting yards.

As we pushed the wagons up a steep grade and yelled for all to heave ho, we noticed that our three religious fellows were not around. We asked Hajdu whether he had sent them on another errand. He replied, "For sure not, these filthy kooks must have run away." And so they had. We only felt sorry as their certain apprehension by roving bands of ruthless field gendarmes who would undoubtedly execute them for the crime of desertion.

Mrs Hajdu observed the storing of their belongings in a freight wagon with critical glances and malicious admonitions. Apparently she was under the impression that our free moving services were a generous privilege she had bestowed upon us.

The train, consisting of more than fifty box cars and two engines was now fully loaded with the regiment's possessions. Some wagons contained motorbikes, bicycles, desks, kitchen equipment, and uniforms, while others carried food provisions and one boxcar harboured live pigs. Artillery men occupied thirty

wagons, while the best equipped box car was base to the regiment's commander, a lieutenant colonel, one major, two captains and four lieutenants.

At noon, due to the benevolence of Master Sergeant Hajdu, we were allowed to share in the meal of the soldiers. In the mess-car we were given a serving of bread and steaming hot gulyás. Our morale surged. We felt like human beings and not outcasts.

Our group, consisting of only seventeen, KMSZ, one sergeant, one lance corporal and two guards were allowed to move into a covered cattle wagon. We felt as if we had been assigned to a wagon-lit. We joinered tiered bunk beds. One side of the wagon was berth to twelve KMSZ, while on the other side, the lower wooden plank bedsteads were occupied by five of our comrades. Our guards took their place above them on the upper level. In the centre of our shelter, we put up a small iron stove which our guards had mooched from the artillery men.

Master Sergeant Hajdu, who due to our flawless transporting of his furniture, had become our mentor, counselled us now, "Fellas, I don't want everyone to know that you are Jews. The best thing is to hide your ugly faces inside the wagon. If you need something your guards will tell me." And with this, he slammed shut the heavy door of the boxcar.

At two o'clock the train moved out of Kassa's city limits. We were on our way to the interior of the Hungarian Motherland. At least, so we thought.

Twenty-One

We looked through the mesh wire grill of the wagon's window. We rumbled by a small railway station and noticed with astonishment that the signs were in the Slovak language.

"Mr Sergeant," we turned to our valiant leader, "do you know what we are doing in Slovakia?" He was just as flabbergasted as we were. "Beats me," he said, "I hope that's not going to mean that they are sending us to the Russian front." Our guards did not want to be shipped to the battle lines. After all, they felt more at ease just being KMSZ guards. The front was meant for others such as the artillery men, whom we were travelling with. Obviously there was something wrong with our routing. We had no idea why the intended direction south to Hungary, should take us north into Slovakia.

A short while later, we came to a halt at a small railway station where the locomotive's water tanks were refilled. Small groups of a ragtag militia, shouldering rifles, were milling around our transport. From a distance, up in the hills, came the ping-ping of sniper fire and the heavier thud of machine guns. We did not understand. This was supposed to be a pacified area, the land of the Slovak fascist puppet government. What was going on here?

The armed peasants regarded our transport with scornful glances, yet refrained from taunting, or provoking the Hungarian soldiers. At the next railway station, our train was now rolling at a reduced speed, we were halted by the station master, who called out to our locomotive engineer, "The tracks to the Dukla pass are cut by

partisans. There are resistance gangs all over the countryside."

One artillery captain alighted from his wagon and consulted briefly with the station master. A few minutes later, we were told that our train would be rerouted toward Zakopane.

Fierce battles were in progress at Dukla. "Between who?" asked one of our Slovak speaking guards, standing at the wagon's slightly opened door. He was addressing the station master. "Don't you guys know anything?" "No, we don't know nothing," replied our valiant guard. "So tell us something so we'll be smarter." "Well, the whole world knows, and you know nothing," insisted the station master, shaking his head incredulously.

"You must be daft. Well, I'll tell you what's going on, but don't tell anyone that you got it from me." "That's enough," replied our flustered guard. "Don't talk to us like fools. We're Hungarian soldiers, and we're much smarter than you." "All right, all right," said the station master in a soothing voice, "but now, I'll tell you all in Hungarian so you will better understand." And he continued in a conspiratorial manner. "You guys better be careful. You could be attacked at any time. You know, actually you don't know, but it started about four weeks ago. A cattle train, stuffed full with Hungarian Jews passed by here. They were shipped to a death camp somewhere in Poland. The German escorts said that they were sending them to a labour camp for resettlement. Big, fat lie. We all knew that they were sending them to be bumped off. Some of our railroad workers saw them shipped to a place called Oswiecim, the Germans call it Auschwitz. It stinks like hell there. Like hell from burning flesh. You don't want to go there, you don't want to vomit. I'm sure the Germans aren't burning their own people there. It must be the Jews."

"C'mon now," said Sergeant Gajdos impatiently. "I think you are making all this up. We aren't Jews, why the hell should we care what they are doing with them." "So what the hell do you want me to tell you?" replied the self-important railroad official. "We want to know why we should be careful?" responded our valiant sergeant. "Because," and now the brave station master took a deep breath, "because, our, naw, naw," he corrected himself, "the partisans dynamited the rail tracks, and the trains couldn't roll for two days." "So what," said Gajdos, "that was then, but now, the tracks are clear." "That's what you think," countered the know-it-all functionary. "You don't know," and he slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand, "eh, you people must be really dumb. Don't you know what's really going on up there or are you trying to be more stupid than you are?"

It seemed to give the station master exquisite pleasure to insult and frighten our guards. They, in turn, were too apprehensive about the obscure dangers lurking about them to put the impudent Slovak into his proper place. They only attempted a feeble retort by saying, "You big station master, you watch your tongue. You're talking to Hungarian soldiers, and you must know better that you have to show more respect. Just call us stupid once more and we'll show you who's stupid around here!" The Slovak did not want to get into a discussion as to who was more stupid. He merely displayed an insolent smirk knowing well that he was a much more important personage than these bragging Hungarians.

"Yeah, but I have to tell you just the same about those Jews, they are sending them another way to Poland, somewhere around Zakopane." "I've told you before, you self-important, fat man, that we aren't interested in what they are doing to the Jews." This remark was obliquely interesting to us, however for their *raison d'être*, was the fate of the Jews, they were assigned to oversee. Or, was it that Gajdos was

trying to protect us and himself by not admitting that there were Jews in his wagon? "Now what about those fierce battles you've mumbled about?" asked Gajdos. "All right, all right," said the Slovak, "but promise you didn't hear it from me. You've heard it only from the birds flying by." "Cut the crap will you?" Gajdos was getting hot under the collar. "You want to tell us, or you're just playing with words like an old whore?" "All right then," said the man, "these aren't rumours, I've heard it myself over the Wehrmacht radio station.

The locomotive started hooting and the signal for our departure was given. "Speak up man will you," Sergeant Gajdos was urging the impudent Slovak. "All right," he said, "there are big battles on both sides of the Dukla pass. There are a half million men fighting on both sides of the Slovak-Polish border. Five hundred tanks, three thousand cannons and trench mortars. The Soviets, together with the Free Czechoslovak Army brigades are knocking the Nazis...I meant the Wehrmacht," corrected the station master.

"Now you know why you can't get to Dukla. The Czechoslovak brigade is already in Slovakia." The train moved out of the station. The official, with a broad grin, waved to our guards and yelled after them, "Good luck brave soldiers, don't run into the partisans or God forbid, the Russians, be careful," and he burst into a loud, boisterous guffaw while clapping and raising his hands high in a victory salute.

The news, true or false, which the station master had apprised us of, was disconcerting. We did not want to be in an area where deportation had taken place. We did not want to get closer to the battle zone where our guards, fearing stricter surveillance, might be accused of having sheltered us. They would, we were certain of this, rather preempt such charges by delivering us into the hands of the

Germans.

On the other side of the equation, becoming prisoners of the advancing Soviets, represented much less worry for us, than for our guards. They would be considered for what they really were, fascist enslavers.

A sign informed us we had been moving from the previous 1,400 metre elevations of the Beskides, to lower lying foothills. Ten minutes later, our train came to an unforeseen halt in the midst of a dense growth of copses. The four lieutenants descended from their box cars and gave brusque orders for their troops to mount machine guns on top of all wagons and post armed sentinels within close to open portholes.

Master Sergeant Hajdu strode over to our freight car and ordered our guards to place the barrels of their rifles through the wagon peepholes. "What good will that do?" asked Sergeant Gajdos. "We have no bullets to shoot the enemy with." "Never mind," said Hajdu, "at least the partisans, if we'll meet any, will see that we are all gung-ho and ready for a fight." This pleased our guards. Finally, they were recognized as part of a fighting unit.

Obediently, they thrust their unloaded guns through the embrasures. I could not withhold a whispered chuckle as I turned to our company's scribe, Sallai, motioning towards our guards, "Look what we've got here, the deranged, yet undaunted Don Quixote de la Mancha and his fat squire, the Slovak-speaking guard, Sancho Panza, alias Hasas, fighting windmills." Sallai slapped his hand against his mouth to stifle a derisive expression of mirth. "What are you two weirdos cackling about?" asked Gajdos, bristling with annoyance.

Sallai replied, "It's rather funny to think that we're going to shoot partisans with empty rifles." "Don't be so smart-arsy," retorted Don Quixote, alias Gajdos, "in the army you do what you're told to do. Nothing is impossible."

Our train chugged along at a reduced speed. Our troops were wary of an ambush. After travelling for over one hour without an untoward incident, our anxious overseers, in a manner of speaking, let their guards down. Our gangly sergeant Gajdos and his portly buck private, had given up on their Quixotical parody of warding off wraithing attackers and withdrew their empty rifles from the wagon's portholes.

Sergeant Gajdos, was really less obnoxious than his sullen and grouching demeanour would indicate, declared with a sign of relief, "Everyone relax now. We're out of danger. Let's stretch out on the bunks. No one talk, cough or fart. Because I want to sleep. So we concurred with his precept and fell silent.

I felt comfortable on the wooden planking of my upper berth, snuggling against the corner of the wagon, next to a small, round ventilation opening. My immediate neighbours were the company's scribe, Sallai, Domonkos, who was half Jewish, a former Budapest philosophy student, another former political science student and three labourers from the capital.

On the lower bunks were Vajda, the horse trainer, a tailor, our barber, the assistant cook and a carpenter who had directed the joinering of our bedsteads. Facing us, perched on several layers of blankets and supervising us with distrustful eyes from their upper level lair, were our four monitors. Below, on the lower wooden framework, were four comrades from the Carpatho-Ukraine, and one from the

hinterlands who, suffering from paranoia, kept to himself, mumbling and staring at the wall incessantly.

Around five o'clock, we arrived at the railway station of Poprad, a small town in northwest Slovakia and a scant one hour distance from Zakopane, on the Polish border. We were still in a quandary as to the logic for travelling north, in order to get to the south.

We heard the familiar clanging of mess tins, the welcome and unmistakeable sound of food being distributed. Sergeant Gajdos ordered his three minions to gather all available cups and pots and fetch dinner for our group. Master Sergeant Hajdu had instructed the regiment's cook to issue rations for twenty-one men, and prudently advised the chef not to probe the absence of our group of eighteen, who had stayed behind in the freight car.

The cook however, could not resist ribbing our three guards for drawing excess food from the canteen, "You three have mighty appetites, you live high off the hog. I think they are fattening you up before they make pork sausage of you!" Our three guards withdrew petulantly and complained to their sergeant, "Now, we have become waiters to the KMSZ," pointing at us reproachfully.

"Times change," said Gajdos sagaciously, "you know, in the army, anything can happen." This was not the first time that he had made similar observations anent to life in the military. "You know," he turned to his unhappy crew, "Master Sergeant Hajdu gave orders that the Jews are not to show their ugly faces outside the wagon." "We are the only ones," he added with a wry smile, "who are allowed to ogle at them."

It was a new and strange relationship of interdependence. We were counting on the guards to provide us with plentiful meals from the artillery kitchen and in turn, our overseers' functions were contingent on our presences. It was in their interest to safeguard their flock, lest their shirking of active military service could have been brought into question. Thus, we were lazing on our wooden berths, savouring with great gusto our dinner and observing with amusement the fidgeting of our valiant warders.

We were travelling in a militarily secured zone where attacks by Slovak partisans were improbable. The officers had withdrawn their armed lookouts. The troops, having consumed ample food rations were relaxing in their wagons, enjoying the drowsing heat of their small iron stoves. The occasional, dissonant martial songs could be heard over the sound of the chugging two locomotives which were exerting their engines to climb the snow and ice-covered tracks of the High Tatra mountain region.

It was a slow and labourious ascent to the mounting altitudes of the 2,600 metre high Gerlachovsky pass. At times, our train slid back on the ice-encrusted rails, spinning wheels and then gathering all the power of their locomotives assaulted the serpentine to surmount the elevations. A while later we were in the midst of a white winterscape. The entire area was heavily snow covered and only the odd fir tree would stretch their green limbs pleadingly through fluffy blankets.

I turned to Sallai, "This is really paradoxical, look out the window, this is the famous Zakopane region. You know, where they held their world championship ski meets." Sallai yawned, "Yeah yeah, what do you want me to say to that?" Replying, I said, "Quite simple, you dunce, here instead of enjoying the panoramic views, the

attractions of a tourist Mecca, we have to worry whether we won't be buried here for good in a snowbank." "What are you talking about?" countered Sallai, "why do you have to be so gloomy, Matyi?" "I'm not really gloomy," then lowering my voice, "but look at our genteel guards and the troops around us. What assurance is there that they will all stick it out and won't get tired of protecting us?"

"Ah," said Sallai with an ethereal and fatalistic expression, "it's in the hands of God, and besides one of my uncles, a great rabbi and holy man who's been a righteous man all his life, promised to pray for me and my comrades." And then becoming completely enraptured by his convictions, he professed, "We, who are religious believe in God's help and his salvation. By following His laws, to the best of our abilities we shall be protected and redeemed. We believe in the covenant between our people and God. And this belief gives us strength, faith and hope. In Him we believe, and to Him we pray." It became a tedious and naive sermon which I had difficulty listening. "Listen Sallai, it's one thing to believe in salvation and hope that one will be spared from afflictions or death, but," and now I was putting more emphasis into my words, "do you really believe that you can strike bargains or business deals with Him, this God you believe in so much?"

Sallai looked at me with baleful eyes, not unlike a child who had been disillusioned about Santa Claus. "Do you really believe that your God, who is omnipotent and it is Him who's putting the words of prayers into your mouth, can be swayed by your incantations?" "It doesn't matter," replied Sallai, "we'll pray and He will save us." "To me," I responded, "it seems like you guys are trying to strike a business deal with Him. The more you pray and flatter Him, He will, for He likes to have His ego stroked, protect you." "Don't be blasphemous," said Sallai. "I'm not," I retorted, "it simply burns my ass seeing you characters going around and actually doing nothing

for anyone else yet believing that you are holier than everyone else." And then I added with even more conviction, "Instead of praying to your God, do something, if you can, and if you dare, for your fellowman." And with this I turned my back on him and had no further desire to discuss religious semantics with him.

Vajda, the horse trainer, who had overheard Sallai's sanctimonious claptrap transfixed him with a caustic glare, and said, "You smart ass, do you think that your rabbi uncle or any other holy man can buy protection from God? A little prayer will make Him proud as punch and will make him save your right away? You're an idiot," he added. "There are only two things in life to protect you, one is sheer, dumb luck and the other is your own brains or guts." "Hey Vajda, how did you become so smart?" asked Sallai with a smirk. "Yeah, I'll tell you, it's from my horses. They don't pray, they depend on good people around them, or otherwise they depend on their horse sense. And I'm telling you, my horses have got more sense than you."

"Now listen Vajda, that's enough of your wisdom," said Sallai, utterly agitated. "You're only an uneducated hick, but I," and now he was raising his voice, "I've absolved the Realgymnasium and acquired my matura with distinction. I know what I'm talking about better than you."

Now it was Vajda's turn to get riled. He was a tall, husky, blue-eyed blond and he never pissed against the wind. He appeared as one of those Jews whose ancestors might have been Khazars, the nomadic Turks who had conquered, in ancient times, Crimea and part of southern Russia. Those people who had freely intermingled with Slavs and racially merged with Jews. Vajda was no dreamer, he was a doer. Vajda balled his massive fists, "I'm not going to pray when I'm in trouble and I won't be

sitting in the shithouse trembling. I'll use my brains and if that doesn't help I'll smash everything down in my way before they will rub me out." Sallai listened submissively and was not prepared to enrage Vajda any further.

Now the other guys wanted to have their say. Selyem, the tailor chimed in, "I am not a religious fellow, but I think I'm a nice guy, I've never hurt anyone and you guys know I've mended your clothes free of charge all the time. If God likes good people, true I never pray, then he should like me."

Finom, the barber spoke up. "Me too, I'm a nice person. I've shaved everyone for free and if I've sometimes bloodied someone's face with my blunt razor, I didn't want to do it. I'm sure God knew that without me having to tell Him so." Finom had become quite emotional. "All right," said Sergeant Gajdos, "Don't cry, we all know that you are a good hair and whisker puller." "Do you want me to give you a clean shave Mr Sergeant? I've no soap, but I'll show you that I won't nick your face." "Not now, Finom, not now. It's only in the mornings that I want to look neat and clean." "You see," said Finom, turning to Sallai, "People like us, in spite that we don't ever pray."

Ács, the carpenter and our hefty assistant cook, Fazekas, wanted to express their views, which seemed to be contagious. "We're not religious and we're not business folks. We're working stiffs. We would just like to work and not cheat anyone and be left alone." And as the two were nodding in agreement to each other, Fazekas added, "Those business people, they're too smart for their breeches. They think they can fool people all the time. And when people get mad at them, then," and now he took a deep breath before making his point, "they'll say that all Jews are crooks and we, the poor working Jews are going to suffer the most." "Yeah, that's true,"

said Ács, "because those high falutin Jews, those money bags will buy their way out and us poor buggers will suffer for their greed."

We thought that this was quite a strong diatribe. One of the Budapest chaps, who had tried his hands in the past with various unsavoury business schemes objected. In an unforgiving tone he said, "You Ács, you are a Communist! There is no point talking or listening to you." This accusation was an abysmal character assassination. Being called a Jewish Communist was the ultimate epithet one could fling against a person.

This insult by a former peddler against a working stiff aroused the ire of Vajda. He yanked the big mouth off his bunk bed and snarled at him, "Hey, you money bag, are you religious too, who's gonna help you now?" And with this, he smashed his big fist into the peddler's mouth. The unfortunate fellow tumbled against the hot iron stove and singed the seat of his pants which caused scalding to his sensitive posterior.

Fazekas, the barrel-chested assistant cook tried to calm down the squealing and squirming business oriented fellow by saying, "No more squabbles fellas, easy, easy, be nice to each other even if you can't stand the looks of the other fellow." This was the most down-to-earth comment so far. During this melee, the four Carpatho-Ukrainians and the paranoid had not uttered a sound and froze in anguish, lest the wrath of the guards in a general hubbub may result in a contact between the overseers's gunstocks and the back of their closest victims.

Everyone calmed down. Yet our quaint exchange of ideas and general perceptions of life resulted in a closer affiliation between some individual members of our group.

One party of like-minded persons consisted of Vajda, Finom, Selyem, Fazekas, Okos-Domonkos, Regész, the former political science student, Ács, the carpenter, myself and with some misgivings, Sallai.

The other group with whom we felt little kinship was comprised of the five comrades across the aisle and the three bigoted and mercantile inclined chaps on the lower bunks. From his upper berth, perched on a pile of blankets, Sergeant Gajdos pontificated, "Guys, guys, peace for heaven's sake. Don't cause a row. Can't you think of me?" "No," we thought. Seeing our insipid expressions, he clarified himself, "What will the artillery guys think of me if I can't keep order here?" As there was no response from us, he adjoined after a reflective pause, "They might force me to join them, just to learn some discipline and that wouldn't be good for me and that wouldn't be good for you. You know that." So we kept our peace to please everyone.

Around seven o'clock, we arrived at the railway station of Zakopane in the High Tatra. A small marker next to an outhouse said the elevation was 2,400 metres.

In the enshrouding darkness of the approaching nightfall, a bright full moon cast an eerie curtain of light onto the side of an imposing mountain. Assumedly, this ought to be the site of the world renown Zakopane ski region.

The area was quiet and had an aura of desolateness and of pervading tristesse. It was hard to imagine that this was once a hub of pleasure-seeking tourists and thrill addicts. Zakopane, on the Slovak-Polish border had become a train marshalling point for troops and deportees.

The soldiers lined up in front of their mess wagon, our two guards, the portly, Slovak-speaking, buck private, Hasas and Hentes, a shifty-eyed slaving slob from Trans-Danubia made their way reluctantly to the canteen to draw our coffee and bread rations. Traipsing through deep snow, they passed by the station master's tin covered cottage. Through a window at ground level, they observed a heated argument between an SS Sturmbannführer and our artillery Major. They could not understand the conversation carried on in German, but our guards commented, "These two officers don't like each other, that is for sure."

Hentes turned to Sergeant Gajdos, "Mr Sergeant, can you figure out why our allied officers would be hassling each other?" The sergeant replied, "You know in the army anything is possible. Perhaps they did not like each other's uniforms. Perhaps our major doesn't like to speak in German. Or perhaps the Sturmbannführer told the Major that we can't travel back the way we came and Hungary is still farther north of here." "Do you think," added Hentes, not quite satisfied with these replies, "that officers are that stupid that they don't know which way is north or south?" "I've told you soldiers many times," said Sergeant Gajdos, "in the army, anything goes."

A few minutes later we heard the cantankerous voices of two men and fragments of a furious conversation. Our sergeant peeked through the wagon's porthole and noticed the Herr Sturmbannführer loping after our artillery Major and trying to explain something in a captious tone. "Es tut mir leid, Herr Major, aber da kann nichts dagegen gemacht werden. Befehl ist Befehl."

Gajdos asked, "Hey you, Matyi, did you understand what those two fatheads were talking about? You were born somewhere in Austria. Don't tell me that you couldn't

make anything out." He was right, I was born somewhere in Austria and this obliged me to have understood their argument.

Commented, "Well, the SS said to our Major that nothing could be done and that an order is an order." "That's all they were arguing about? I don't understand why they had to crawl at each other for that," grumbled Gajdos. The sergeant's trusted minion, San-Hasas, gave immediate vocal support to his superior, "I don't understand at all how these two big shots became officers, if they don't understand that an order is an order. Hey, even I can understand that." And now San-Hasas looked about searching for signs of respect for his wisdom. "They must be soft in the head," added San-Hasas. "Yeah," said Sergeant Gajdos, "it wouldn't surprise me a bit." And then with a disillusioned motion of his hand, he reconfirmed his credo, "Nothing surprises me in the army."

Lance Corporal Sebes, a former factory hand from Kispest, who up to this point had not partaken in the palaver expressed his own observation, "I think that Sergeant Gajdos, myself and our two instructors have had enough of all this bunk for one day. Let's shut up and get some sleep." He waited for Gajdos' approval. "You're right Sebes, let's cut the crap."

Okos-Domonkos, the philosophy student wanted to corroborate and sanctify these smart decisions and said in a tongue and cheek manner, "That's a good idea, after a good night's sleep, we'll all feel better and smarter." San-Hasas, nudging his crony Hentes in the backside said, "We could use that, eh?" We all turned in, and hoped that by morning we would finally be rerouted to our beloved Motherland, Hungary.

Twenty-Two

We had spent the entire night at Zakopane. Apparently, negotiations were still going on between our officers and the Herr Sturmbannführer. The two sides were most likely waiting for further orders from their respective higher-ups.

At dawn, we were given the green light to move out of Zakopane. Our train was rolling toward lower lying foothills. While we were still lounging on our bunks, and before our six o'clock breakfast call, Regész hopped onto the sides of my berth and whispered, "Matyi, I don't want the others to hear, but I have some miserable premonitions." "What is it?" I tried to mix a tone of levity into my query, "Is it stomach cramps and you are upset because you cannot relive yourself in the wagon?" "Cut it out Matyi, that's not the problem. You know that one can always stick his butt out the wagon door and let the wind take care of the rest. Believe me, it's much more than that. Listen to me, I don't want to alarm the others. I only want to discuss this with you. I know that you won't shoot off your mouth to anyone."

My curiosity was sufficiently aroused, so I told him, "What is the big problem?" "Hey you Matyi, don't think that I'm all nuts, and you are the only one who is level headed." "So what," I said, "what is your news. Don't just hawk, tell me."

He recomposed himself and said, "Have you noticed just a few minutes ago that we passed by Nowy Targ?" "It sounds to me just like any other of those weird local names," I replied. "Yeah, but there's more to it than you think. This stinking place is exactly en route that the deportation trains have been taking to go to Auschwitz."

"How the hell do you know that?" I asked with skepticism. "Listen Matyi, let's try to be logical about this." "Go ahead, make your point," I said with some irritation. I was in no mood to listen to any rumour mongering. Life had provided us with a sufficient measure of problems without having to spice it up with atrocity stories or *Greuelpropaganda* as the Germans would put it.

"Now I'll tell you what I've learned," said Regész, while searching for a more confined corner of my berth. "One of the artillery lieutenants who is staying in the command car is a former colleague of my Budapest University days. He recognized me last night as he was walking by our wagon. Naturally he was surprised in finding me here. We had always been good friends, as a matter of fact we grew up in the same neighbourhood." "Listen Regész, you're getting on my nerves, why the hell don't you get to the point, or are you going to tell me how many times you've laid his sister," I replied impatiently.

In a slightly huffed tone, he said "Look Matyi, the Sturmbannführer at Zakopane had received an order to direct our transport to Auschwitz where the SS wanted to confiscate the contents of our train and being short of freight cars, they intended to utilize our wagons for Jewish deportation. The SD (Sicherheitsdienst) along with the Gestapo had sent a telephone order for trains to service the death camps. Our officers strenuously protested to such unauthorized capture of a Hungarian military transport. In response, the Sturmbannführer intimated that a final decision anent to our transport would be renegotiated at Auschwitz."

Regész stopped and took a deep breath, "Now Matyi, do you understand why I'm scared to death. If they start searching the wagons at Auschwitz, we'll be goners." In a calm voice I said, "Listen Regész, first of all let's not discuss this with anyone in

the wagon." "And then what? Is that all you can suggest?" he responded in an irritated manner. "No," I said, "after breakfast try to get in touch with the lieutenant and ask him to keep his trap shut about us. Let your friend only tell the other officers that they'll have to cover for us, otherwise they'll get into more trouble if they find out that they've knowingly sheltered us. If and when the Germans should check off the wagons, the officers should include our wagon as one of their important supply carriages which has to be returned to Hungary."

Regész looked at me incredulously. "Do you think that the officers will go along with this plot? And do you think it's that easy to fool the Germans? You know they are not dimwits." "I can't think of anything better," I replied in an annoyed manner. "Well," Regész said, "I don't think that this is such a fantastically smart scheme you are hatching." "What better ideas can you come up with?" I asked him. "This is the only thing we can do. If your lieutenant is such a great friend of yours then he will tag along and perhaps save his and the other officers reputation. I repeat, the officers can't admit that they know about us." "And what happens if they discover us?" asked Regész, "and what will happen to the artillery officers." "They won't have to fear much," I replied, "the only ones who will carry most of the blame will be our guards. After all, it was the KMSZ command who put us on the train."

Reluctantly Regész gave in and accepted my suggestions. It was understandable that he did not want to unnecessarily incriminate the lieutenant.

Around nine o'clock our train came to a halt at Wadowice, another small town and according to Regész, a mere twenty-five kilometres from Auschwitz. We were to stay at Wadowice a few hours. Regész asked Sergeant Gajdos for permission to see his former friend, the artillery lieutenant for a few minutes. Sergeant Gajdos was

impressed that one of his charges should have such an important crony. "All right Regész, but hurry back."

Regész slunk between the wagons attempting not to be seen by the soldiers. He arrived at the command post and asked to see the lieutenant. The lieutenant felt uncomfortable being seen talking with a KMSZ. The two talked behind the wagon where Regész impressed upon his friend the mutually important aspect of safeguarding us. The lieutenant promised to do everything in his power and then said to Regész, "You guys have struck it really lucky with us. Our officer corps hates the guts of the Germans, and especially the SS. We don't like to be bossed around by them. Whenever we can, we try to counter their orders. In the eyes of our commanding officer, the lieutenant colonel and my other superiors, you, KMSZ guys, are Hungarians. You are our unfortunate brethren."

Regész looked at his friend with tearful eyes. "All right man, don't collapse on me," said the lieutenant. We were pals once and as far as I'm concerned, we'll stay friends forever." Regész looked around and seeing no one who could observe them, warmly embraced the shoulders of his friend, Pista. "I'll never forget you and I would never have thought I would find a mate like you who looks at us like fellow human beings." "That's enough sentimentality," said Pista, "we have heard enough stories committed by the SS to hate their guts and to feel for you." And then he recounted to his friend the rumours, but mostly facts regarding Auschwitz, which were making the rounds in the officer corps. These reports were based on secretly circulated SD reports and substantiated in many instances by death camp service personnel.

There was much disturbing data on the conditions in these camps and the gruesome deeds of the Bureau III of the SD and their executioners, the dreaded SS Totenkopfverbände, who wore a skull and crossbones insignia on their black tunics and kepis.

Lieutenant Pista spoke about the pseudo medical experiments performed by SS doctors. There was a glut of human guinea pigs available to satisfy the most morbid, quasi-scientific ideas of these charlatans.

Reports surfaced that prisoners with tattoos were humanely killed (shot), so that their skin would not deteriorate in the normal course of extermination. The fancier their tattoos, the more sought-after were their temporal owners. They were dispatched and their skin carefully removed and sent to the SS bigwigs who liked to have lampshades made of esoteric material with special preference for human epidermis. Obviously, it also represented a good conversation piece.

Other accounts related to the predilection for cleanliness by the SS. Soap was very important. A concomitant components for this material was grease or fat. The fat could easily be obtained from gassed victims. In this manner, the bodies of the inferior humans could be put to good use before their ultimate cremation. Although at a later point, SS agronomists discovered that the fine ashes of incinerated bodies could also be used to fertilize the soil.

There were phrenological experiments where cephalic index measurements were taken, all in the interest of pure science by which the shape and protuberances of skulls would inconvertibly establish the superiority of the Teutonic race. Thus, genetic and racial characteristics could be verified which would preclude

prevarications by inmates as to their ethnicity.

Important research work was done in the endeavour to save lives of downed German flyers, stranded sailors or army personnel who might be exposed to intolerably long periods of harsh wintry weather conditions. Methods had to be found to resuscitate, if at all possible, these fighters for the Fatherland.

Fortuitously, there was an infinite number of prisoners in the death camps who could be utilized to contribute to the resolution of this worthwhile medical endeavour.

Prisoners would be stripped of their clothing and laid out in the freezing cold and for speedier observation time, be doused with water. Before the untimely expiration of the racially inferior mediums, the concerned medical pioneers would put into effect several systems which would effectuate the reviving of their patients. This would be primarily accomplished with the gradual application of heat. Various types of clothing were used, the effects of room temperatures on the mediums were observed and as a final triumph of forward thinking, the pioneers of medical fame devised the *modus operandi* of body heat.

For this purpose, a number of female prison inmates were recruited. The half-frozen experimental cases were pushed into the enveloping arms and clutching thighs of the warm female bodies. Some of the glacial bodies revived sufficiently to attempt copulation with their female benefactors. Other victims were more demanding and required more than one female body to regain their normal bodily reactions.

Studies were made on the advisability of having female volunteers for such medical altruistic work stationed in cold climates to perform salutary work for the armed personnel of The Reich.

Other horrendous intelligence reports surfaced from the camps. The vivisection of twins. The impregnation of female inmates by genetically inferior individuals or carriers of contagious diseases. The development of subsequent fetuses was again subjected to the analytical scrutiny of the diabolical SS doctors.

It was a shattering exposé which my comrade Regész had recounted. I had to express my doubts about the truth of these horrors which the Nazis would simply call Greuelpropaganda, or atrocity.

Regész had questioned his friend, Lieutenant Pista, with the same reservations. "Do you think," replied the lieutenant, "that I have enough imagination to make this up? No my friend, these news relays came directly from the SS Totenkopfverbände men. In spite of sworn secrecy, they had bragged, possibly in a drunker stupor, to their families or friends while on leave about the death camp conditions. Some hospitalized SS officers, while under anaesthesia had babbled to the medical staff about their camp experiences. You know these things have a way of filtering out to the public's attention."

"What do you make of it?" queried Regész, "that millions of people claim ignorance of these happenings? I would think it is out of fear. People know about it, but they are afraid to admit it. The ears and eyes of the Gestapo are everywhere. Anyone caught spreading such false and debilitating news, which would infringe upon the morale of the masses, would risk his life."

"Now," said Pista, "I can't spend any more time with you. Get back to your wagon and don't forget, none of your friends is to leave the wagon. If there is something important, I'll pass word on to you guys." As an afterthought Lieutenant Pista said, "Pass on my order to your guards to continue having your meals picked up at our mess canteen."

Once more, Regész shook hands with his buddy and said, "You seem to be more than a brother to me. God bless you." Regész had scurried back to us. He recounted to Sergeant Gajdos his meeting with the lieutenant while omitting any references to the ignominious place called Auschwitz, nor did he mention the Germanophobie of the artillery officers. The guards were told of the order to fetch our meals.

We had carried on our conversation in muffled tones. Yet, some words might have been inadvertently spoken at higher levels. The five guys on the lower bunks of the opposite side, whom we had routinely called the lugubrious malingerers, started whining, "Oh Auschwitz, oh no!" We tried to calm them down by insisting that they shut up and not draw attention from the outside. It was hard for them to follow our advice as they knew that their families had already been sent to that hellish camp where torture and death beckoned.

Even our guards, fearing potential accusations of collusion with us showed signs of undisguised shock. It had never occurred to anyone among us that our return to Hungary would bring us on the road to that notorious place.

At three in the afternoon, our train slowly started out on its way to that odious death camp. We passed through a tranquil landscape and nestled at the fringes of

forested areas were small villages. An hour later we stopped at Auschwitz. The station area was swarmed with German train workers, Wehrmacht soldiers and SS Totenkopfverbände personnel.

On a secondary railway siding was a stationary Hungarian cattle train. Loud wailing female voices fell into laments and then sang in unison, bitter-sweet Hebrew songs, intermingled with the sounds of a throatier, defiant male chorus. It was from within the hermetically sealed wagons that these Hungarian Jews tried to bolster the sagging spirits by vocalizing, "Am Israel, chai," "the people of Israel live," along with The Hatikvah, the Jewish anthem.

A chill spiralled down our spines as we helplessly listened to the anguished cries of these innocent, famished and thirst-crazed men, women and children whom God had chosen as his people, the Jews, to be murdered.

An SS Hauptsturmführer accompanied by a squad of Totenkopf goons walked along the lines of our transport. The doors of all wagons were shut. The SS officer, holding a document in his gloved hand verified its data with our artillery major who stood at the inside of his command car door. After a few tense moments, the two officers had apparently come to a consensus. The SS captain thrust out his right arm in a snappy, stiff Hitler salute while the Hungarian major responded with a slack tap to his kepi.

The Herr Hauptsturmführer brayed to his underlings, who were encircling our locomotive, "Das ist kein Judentransport, das ist ein ungarischer Militärzug" (this is not a Jew transport, this is a Hungarian army train). And then, with a scornful and derisive demeanour he commanded, "Zum Teufel mit ihnen, durchfahren lassen."

("The hell with them! Let them pass through!") Then rounding up his men he hollered in a jeering manner, "Zurück in's Lager, Männer, denn Arbeit macht frei." ("Back into camp men, because work liberates.") The last exclamation had a familiarity to it. And then it came to mind that it was the sardonic slogan many people had gossiped about which was the welcoming sign erected over the entrance to Auschwitz.

"What did the SS officer scream about?" Gajdos wanted to know. "He said that we were a Hungarian military transport and to hell with us and let them pass through." I did not mention to Gajdos the exact order of commands the SS captain had uttered, specifically that this was not a Jew transport nor that he told his men to return to camp where the cynically malicious motto was, *work will render free*.

"Blessed be Jesus Christ and the Holy Mother," said Sergeant Gajdos, while he clasped his hands in a devout gesture. Sebes, the lance corporal and the Messrs Instructors, Hasas and Hentes nodded in agreement while turning their eyes skywards. Even our malingerers had stopped complaining and we all heaved a traumatic deep sigh of relief as our train moved out of this infernal charnel house, this pestilent blot on humanity and the designs of God, called Auschwitz.

Our train had been steaming unhindered in a northerly direction for a number of hours. We still had no idea where this journey would ultimately lead. We stoked the fire in our small iron stove, warmed water in a large tin vessel and took turns in cleansing ourselves.

When I took off my shirt, I noticed that stuck to the innermost seams of its pocket was the amulet given to me a long time ago. It was the emblem depicting Saint

Elizabeth, a direct descendant of the first Magyar dynasty, the House of Árpád. This talisman was to protect me from harm. Yet, during the years of hardship I had completely forgotten about it.

Our transport tarried a lot. There were constant stops caused by Wehrmacht trains which were given priority passage. In the evening, we rolled through the small town of Gleiwitz. This name evoked vague memories in me, but I could not recall any distinct association. All I knew was that we had arrived into the Third German Realm (das dritte Reich).

Regész had, in one of his dissertations as a former political science student, researched the ascendancy of the Third Reich, and the beginning of Word War II. I turned to him with the question, "Does, by any chance, this God-forsaken name Gleiwitz remind you of anything historical?" Regész replied, "Yes, it was at the very end of August, 1939 that we heard over the German radiowaves that the despicable Poles, not being content with harassing their long suffering German citizens had the audacity to attack the German radio station at Gleiwitz. This peaceful town of 150,000 industrious Germans were wantonly reminded of the treacherous intents of the ruling Polish circles. And then, so the German radio bombast continued, "The perfidious Polish government stated that such an attack had never taken place and it was the Germans who had dreamed up this affair, wanting to provoke an international incident."

Continuing, Regész said, "The Germans branded the Poles as liars and reported the following facts that Polish soldiers had crossed into Germany and seized the radio station causing some casualties. Fortunately, so the news report by the German Propaganda ministry continued, our alert troops were successful in swiftly repulsing

this perfidious attack and killed a number of the Polish bandits. The rest cowardly retreated across the border. That's about all I remember about the Gleiwitz incident." And do you know what happened after?" I asked. "Yes, we all know. On 1 September, 1939, Reichkanzler Hitler, the paragon of peaceful coexistence between nations, addressed his people over the Deutschlandsender (the official German state radio). He told his people that in consequence of the Gleiwitz attack, and other Polish border violations, and in spite of his arduous efforts for peace, he could no longer stand by and was forced to order the Wehrmacht to return fire with fire, and meet bombs with bombs."

Now it all came back to me. Some particulars resurged into my awareness. Hitler's raucous and pompous voice over the radio, his hypocritically, messianic messages to the German nation. His assertions of fulfilling the destiny of Aryan German people, the betterment of their life and the foreordainment of bringing peace and order to Europe with the vision of the Tausendjährige Reich (the realm of the millennium).

I had listened on this memorable day to part of this speech, seated on a park bench in a small Prague shopping mall. At that time, I was hiding from the Gestapo in the Czechoslovak capital. I had no valid identity papers, no money and no means of sustenance. The only support I received was from the Czech Salvation Army. They provided myself and some other refugees with pieces of used clothing and had established a soup kitchen for the needy, regardless of their nationality or religion.

Normally the Salvation Army would give me, upon leaving their kitchen, two lard-spread slices of bread for supper. Then I would seek out a bench in the Wilsonovo park next to Prague's largest railway station and spend the night there. At dawn,

Czech farmers from the villages would unload their goods in this area for distribution to local merchants. I would seek out a bench close to all the hubbub of their activities in order to avoid detection in a more isolated spot. I also recall that the Salvation Army occasionally distributed a few banknotes from their meagre reserves.

Only after the war, were the true events around the Gleiwitz affair revealed. The German Abwehr, the Intelligence Bureau of the OKW, together with Reinhard Heydrich's SD of the SS had concocted a plan whereby SS men, clad in Polish army uniforms would seize the Gleiwitz radio station. A Polish speaking German, masquerading as a Polish soldier would grab the microphone and attempt to talk to German listeners. He was quickly prevented from carrying out further malicious acts by valiant German soldiers. In order to make the sham attack more plausible to the outside world, a few attackers, mostly Poles garbed in Polish army uniforms were left shot dead on the ground.

The next day, we passed through forested lowlands which gave way to agrarian fields and industrial complexes. We were now in upper Silesia, an area well-known for its abundant coal production. This territory was once a province of Greater Prussia (Preussen).

At nightfall, we came to a halt at the outskirts of Oppeln. I remembered from my high school days that this was the capital of Upper Silesia, and inhabited by about 75,000 worthy Germans who lived around the banks of the Oder River.

Shortly after supper, we heard someone banging on the door of our wagon. It was an artillery sergeant who had received an order to take me to his commanding officer, the lieutenant colonel. I did not know what this might be about, however I had an idea that the officer must have found out that I could speak German and wanted to discuss something in this regard.

The fact that a man of his dignified position would want to invite a lowly KMSZ worker to his quarters was an honour which I hoped could alleviate, or at least clear up our situation.

Sergeant Gajdos felt vicariously flattered that one of his charges would have a meeting with the artillery commander and felt obliged to admonish me with the remark, "Matyi, when you see the Mr Lieutenant Colonel, answer all questions briefly and remember all the good military training we've given you." It was now dark and we met with no one on our way to the officers' quarters. There my escort respectfully knocked on the door and announced my arrival.

"Come in fast and shut the door behind you," said someone in a deep, baritone voice. Upon entering the billet, I realized that it was the lieutenant colonel, a man in his late fifties, who had spoken to me. The wagon was lit by a few kerosene lamps. The interior was sparsely furnished, containing only a few fold-away army cots, three desks, a table, chairs and a large chiffoniere with an attached mirror.

The officer looked at me with a mixture of condescension and ambiguous apprehension. The reason for the display of this sentiment was unclear to me until the commander started to question me about my proficiency in the German language. "And where did you pick up this language?" he asked in a haughty

manner. Replying, I said, "Sir, Mr Lieutenant Colonel, I was born in Vienna and had all of my schooling there." "Well, does that mean you could faultlessly transcribe an official German text into Hungarian?" "Yes Sir, Mr Lieutenant Colonel," I replied, whereupon I respectfully clicked my heels in the prescribed military manner. "I could do it without any problem." The officer nodded and handed me a folder containing a few sheets of paper.

"Here are some reports which I want you to translate into Hungarian, word by word. You know I understand German, and you won't be able to fool me." He looked at me sternly and then he said, "It depends on how well you'll do your job if I ought to let you do more transcribing for me." "I'll do my job to your complete satisfaction. Mr Lieutenant Colonel," I said.

"Well then," he responded, "you'll sit down by this desk and don't get up until you're done." He paced up and down in the wagon and then thoughtfully said, "You know the situation, a lot of men might depend upon how well you do your job." I was not quite sure what he was implying but I did not fail to notice the awkward shuffling around by the officers who obviously felt dejected in having to depend on the wits of a KMSZ.

All I knew was that the commander must have some other tasks in mind and he was only testing me. All Hungarian officers had a rudimentary knowledge of German and the fact that they had asked me to do an authentic translation meant that they had no familiarity with German technical or military terms and most likely did not understand the German vernacular. All this might turn in my, or perhaps, our group's favour.

"Here Matyas," the commander said, while he pushed the folder into my hands, "get cracking."

Twenty-Three

I sat down by the desk and looked at the front page of the binder. I could hardly believe my eyes. There was an annotation in bold print urging all commanders to take note of these reports and destroy all written evidence thereafter. It was a puzzle to me how these notes could have fallen into the hands of the Hungarian officers. Then the thought occurred to me that perhaps during the stormy encounter at Zakopane between the Herr SS Sturmbannführer and our artillery major that the artillery major misappropriated these documents.

They were multigraphed sheets of various secret reports issued by the RSHA, Bureau III of the SD, and Bureau IV of the Gestapo (Geheime Staatspolizei, secret state police). It had to do with the Endlösung, or Final Solution of the Jewish question. They were based on the Wannsee conference, a suburb of Berlin which took place on 20 January, 1942. Reinhard Heydrich, head of the SS, SD and deputy chief of the Gestapo declared that there were approximately eleven million Jews in all of Europe who had to be disposed of.

In the years from 1939 to 1942, it was up to the Einsatzgruppen, or extermination groups, to do away with the Jews. These groups were divided into sections of A, B, C, and D and followed the Wehrmacht into Poland and the Soviet Union. Jews were herded together, told to assemble for resettlement, stripped of their clothing, lined up in front of anti-tank ditches and shot dead. Hence they were resettled.

It was during the summer of 1939 that posters were put on wall in Prague, ordering all Jews to register at various SS offices for resettlement scheduling. At that time, I

had no idea of the true meaning of this term. I reported to the SS where Jews waited for hours in a queue to be interrogated by young SS thugs. We were not allowed to talk and requests to use the lavatories were denied. These young goons walked up and down the lines with horse whips in their hands and slashed the bodies of such individuals whose looks they disliked.

I was called before an SS officer who directed questions to me in *Jiddish*. When I told him that regretfully I did not understand his communication and spoke only German and Hungarian he relented and asked in German, "Aren't you Jewish?" I said, "Yes, but I am also Austrian." This answer seemed to partially please but also confuse him. He said, "If you are an Austrian, what are you doing here?" I said, "Perhaps I've misunderstood the meaning of the posted order for resettlement."

My attitude was typically German arrogant as I well understood their behaviour having been raised in their milieu and their superior strutting demeanour riled me to no end. Granted I was young and the fury of having been dislodged by the Nazis from my native country had not diminished.

Luckily for me, the young interrogating SS fellow, seemed to have an intuitive understanding of my feelings and said to me, "Listen you, I'll stamp your papers (I had an old invalid Hungarian passport with me), and get the hell out of here. Don't show me your face again, or you won't be this lucky next time." Really, he did the right thing by me. I did not report for resettlement as all the other settlers were told to and went into hiding in Prague.

At a later stage, on orders of Himmler, these victims were delegated to so-called mobile gas vans. Himmler had almost fainted during an execution inspection and

could no longer countenance the fusillade of women and children. There, carbon monoxide fumes entering the interior took care of the resettlers.

Karl Eichmann, head of the Gestapo's Jewish office, declared years later that the Einsatzgruppen had solved the problem of two million Jews. Then there was the declaration by Hans Frank who, in December 1941, as Governor General of Poland, said among other things, "The Poles shall be the slaves of The German Reich." He also declared, "There are millions of Jews in the territory of the General Government of Poland. We can't shoot or poison them all. We'll have to find other means."

Another report mentioned Auschwitz, a town of about 10,000 near Cracow, where a Vernichtungslager, or extermination camp was being operated with the collaboration and efficiency of the world renown industrial giants, I.G. Farben, the Krupp works and others. I.G. Farben, chemical corporation, established a synthetic coal oil rubber plant at Auschwitz, employing slave labourers. They also had a patent for a hydrocyanic crystallized acid power called Zyklon-B which, as pellets, were dropped through vents into the shower facilities or death chambers. Jews were herded into these chambers and instead of being treated to a shower, were poisoned and suffocated to death by Zyklon-B.

A special group of Jewish labourers, called Sonderkommandos were engaged in pulling the entangled, murdered bodies with hooks and gaffs. These handlers had to hose down the defecated cadavers, remove their valuables, extract gold teeth and cut their hair. All these commodities had intrinsic worth to The Reich. After these procedures, the Sonderkommandos had to load the corpses onto trolleys which carried them to the crematoria.

During the summer of 1944, according to Rudolf Franz Hoess, who supervised Auschwitz, 300,000 Hungarian Jews were disposed of. Years later, Hoess declared that two and one half million Jews were gassed and another half million were starved to death at Auschwitz.

In June 1945, I accidentally met Barna on a Budapest sidewalk. The former vigorous fellow, who in pre-war years had been a stone cutter and whom we used to mockingly call big tail, was now a human wreck. He looked like a walking skeleton. He had difficulty remembering me. His facial expression was tortured, his eyes were vapid, his speech slurred and he had difficulty controlling the epileptic-like convulsions of his body. He seemed to have lost his mind. In a stuttering manner, he told me that he had been working at Auschwitz as a Sonderkommando inmate.

One day, while dislodging poisoned bodies from the gas chambers with a long hooked pole, he pulled apart the entwined bodies of his parents who, in their death throes were clinging to each other. The SS wanted him to cut the hair of his parents and to extract their teeth. He refused. He was attacked by an SS guard. He knocked the goon unconscious. Barna was supposed to be gassed with the next group. An SS sergeant, who had been his overseer, pleaded for his life. Barna had been spared. He did not remember anything after that. He did not even know how he got back to Hungary.

I finished my work around midnight. The lieutenant colonel examined the Hungarian version of the secret German reports. The officer now spoke to me in German. His grammar was atrocious. I had no idea as to why he wanted to test

my German. He took away the original folder with the secret German circulars and said, "It would be best to get rid of this," and threw the papers into the fire of the small iron stove.

The officers watched their commander with anxiety as he impulsively stalked the length of the coach without uttering a word. He stomped up and down, occasionally thumping the heels of his boots onto the flooring as to give emphasis to some worrisome thoughts which occupied his mind.

Abruptly, he stopped in front of me, "You know Matyas, I didn't have you do this job," and he held out the Hungarian transcript, "for purely academic reasons." I stood at attention waiting tensely for the disclosure of his intentions.

"These reports only corroborate the terrible acts we have been intimated about for awhile. They confirm the tragic magnitude of misdeeds which we hesitate to believe." He paused for a moment and then while raising a warning finger at me, he said, "You have done a good job, but you are not going to spill a word about this to anyone." He then crumpled my labourious handiwork and threw it into the fire, commenting, "We can't have any incriminating papers lying around here." And now he stopped digressing, "Matyas, I'm going to tell you what I really want from you." He spoke in a curt manner, emphasizing each word harshly and in a garrulous tone as if he were throwing a gantlet at an adversary. "I want you to write a strong protest to the Wehrmacht, challenging their authority to reroute our transport and attempting to confiscate our regiment's train and the belongings of the Hungarian Royal Treasury."

The officers discussed this matter excitedly amongst themselves and measured me with evaluating glances, as to verify whether I could phrase their superior's words in a convincing manner.

"Sit down," the lieutenant colonel ordered, "and start writing." He was dictating a letter to a Wehrmacht colonel, a liaison officer with the OKW stationed at Breslau, the capital of Lower Silesia. After the formalities of introductions and salutations, the commander came to the gist of his message without any further circumvention.

In concurrence with my oral presentations, I am submitting herewith a strong protest and am lodging my objections in writing against the unauthorized, diversional rerouting of our transport.

I am enclosing herewith an authenticated translation of an order by the superior officer of our artillery division to immediately relocate, for regrouping and refurbishing purposes, to the Province of Pest, pending further orders to reassemble in Trans-Danubia.' This directive also obliges our regiment to pull out from Kassa forthwith, together with all equipment and movables. The transfer of your regiment is to be completed within ten days from the date of this missive.

In conjunction with the above, I must strongly protest the unauthorized delay of our transport to Hungary, which interference prevents me from carrying out my orders. In this context, I must respectfully insist upon the immediate rerouting of our regiment and the full complement of our equipment and furnishings contained within this Hungarian Royal Defence forces train, to our homeland.

Furthermore, I shall request permission to have the contents of this letter telegraphed to our divisional headquarters in Hungary.

This was the essence of the letter. The lieutenant colonel, having finished his memorandum, seemed less animated as before. He told me to have his epistles transcribed into German immediately. He also instructed one of his subalterns to fetch Sallai. Apparently the commander knew about every member of our group and was aware that Sallai had been our battalion's scribe. A typewriter was placed on one of the desks, and my comrade started, under my surveillance, to transpose my handwritten letter in an official printed message format.

We finished our work by three o'clock in the morning. The lieutenant colonel, together with his major, studied the contents of the letters carefully and then expressed satisfaction with our work.

"Boys," he said with some warmth creeping into his voice, "let's hope that these letters, together with the solicitations I will present in person, will accomplish our speedy return to Hungary. God willing," he added.

As we prepared to leave and saluted deferentially to all officers, the lieutenant colonel called out after us, "Fellas, I'll try to look after you as long as I can. All my men will do the same thing." And as to give more weight to his words, he said, "Don't despair boys, have hope."

We were escorted back to our wagon by a corporal. We signalled our arrival by a known cadence of knocks, whereupon Hentes, in pushing the door open, grumbled,

"Yeah, nowadays, one has to be at the service of you guys, day and night. You won't let me get a decent night's sleep." And Gajdos sat up on his heap of blankets and blasted us with, "Where in bloody hell have you been for so long? I've been up all this time worrying that you'd been picked up by the Germans." Well, for sure, Gajdos did not care a hoot about us, it was the prospect of being misjudged by the Germans as our protectors that made him queasy.

"Say, I couldn't refuse the commander not to stay until my job was done, or could I've just because Sergeant Gajdos wanted to get enough sleep?" I retorted. "So what did you have to do that was so important?" Gajdos wanted to know. "I had to write a letter to the Germans in Breslau, you know, that's going to be our next stop. "What's that place called anyway, B'slau? What's so important about that mucking village anyway, I've never heard about it before." "It's a city of half a million and we told the German command that we want to go home." I limited myself to the simplest explanation, I figured Gajdos would understand.

"Oh yeah," Gajdos said, "I don't understand why we have to tell the Germans this again. They already know that. They are not that stupid that we have to keep on repeating." That being true, I thought the lieutenant colonel should have asked for Gajdos' opinion before forcing everyone to stay up for nothing well past midnight.

"You know," I said to our worthy sergeant, "it's possible, if we all stick together, that we might get permission at Breslau to go home." "Why only at that place? Why didn't we ask before?" complained Gajdos. His queries were becoming tedious. But he carried on with his reasoning. "I don't see why we have to visit that town, whatever its name is. Why didn't the artillery officers write a letter before?" Gajdos wanted to hammer home the point that he was smarter than all the rest of us.

"Mr Sergeant," I said, in a mockingly respectful tone, the guy was grating my nerves, "I think we should get some sleep now, and in the morning we all should get spruced up. Perhaps tomorrow we will be lucky and we will go home." I wanted him to feel better and stop jabbering.

"Up everybody," shouted Gajdos. He was cheerful and frisky this morning. It was around six o'clock. He was full of hopeful anticipation. "You there," he spoke to Finom, our barber, "You'll give everyone a neat haircut and shave. But don't bloody everyone's mug like you do all the time. If we go home, we have to look handsome.

Finom was more than happy to oblige. This job would take his mind off the problems everyone seemed to be wrestling with. Gajdos now turned to Selyem. "You're a tailor ain't you? Then don't just sit around and mope. Get cracking, get your dagger, I mean your needle, ha, ha, fix everyone's rags and make us look decent." No one had any qualms about this order. It was just overdue that we should be spiffed up a bit.

"Selyem," I said, "patch up my pants and jacket and stitch together the open seams. You know, I might have to report back to the officers and I don't want to look like a filthy rag peddler." "All right, all right," Selyem replied, "for you, especially, I'll do a dandy job, after all, thanks to you, we might get back home." "Don't butter me up, Selyem, just make me look like a Casanova." "Sure thing, Matyi" he said, and pulled from his satchel an assortment of coloured trimmings and asked me to choose.

My pants were of a dark blue colour, and he had no such colour to match. Out of necessity, we picked a handful of spinach green, dirty grey and herring bone striped black patches. Selyem proceeded to attach this coloured assortment to my pants. Then he steam ironed his masterpiece with a wooden block and dangled his achievement before my eyes. "You see what I've done just for you, Matyi? No one could have done a better job."

I tried on the multicoloured trousers and was certain that I must have looked like a clown. In spite of this, I had to be content with Selyem's handiwork. At least I looked less like a ragamuffin, and more like a circus entertainer.

But Selyem had more ideas for nattiness in store for me. "Give me your kepi, I'll make you look really dashing." And with his nimble fingers he started to work on my army regulation cap. He stuck stiff cardboard strips into the peaked inner rims and cleaned and ironed the head wear. Indeed the cap looked impressive, almost like an officer's.

However, the real problem was to mend my jacket. It was a quilted yellowish green outfit which Selyem, having no similar colour available, had adorned with rose shaded strips of cloth. Our couturier was priding himself of his sartorial dexterity and I felt utterly ridiculous wearing a rainbow shaded garb.

Our train pulled out of Oppeln (Opole in post-war Poland) in the afternoon. By then we had been spruced up by our barber and tailor and now sat together in cliquish groups discussing our chances.

Okos-Domonkos and Regész were questioning Sallai and myself about our session with the officer. "Well you guys," I said, "it isn't as rosy as I told the guards." "So what was the point in creating false hope?" Okos asked. "That's the best we can do. We can't let the guards and our comrades become completely discouraged. Our moral is low enough as it is."

"Oh yeah?" jeered Okos. "In that case, despair will grow worse if things don't work out." "I know that, Okos," I replied in a riled tone. "If you're going to spread negatives, you'll really make things worse. You'll kill all hope and resistance. You will make everyone lose their spirit." "Yeah, Matyi is right," chimed in Regész, "even if we're not sure, it's better to have hope than no hope at all." "Yes guys," I said, "it's entirely good luck, and the good will of the officers and soldiers and how we will adjust to changes that will make or break us."

We all sat in silence for a moment. "But there's one thing I've been noticing," said Sallai, "the artillery guys seem to get tired of us. I've a distinct feeling that they wouldn't mind kicking us off the train." I could not disagree with this perception but did not want to corroborate it.

In the diminishing light of the rapidly approaching dusk, our train slowly rumbled into the expanse of a marshalling yard. Railway tracks criss-crossed a vast area down the lines that seemed to run into an intricate maze.

Dark smoke from idling locomotives settled heavily onto rolling stock which appeared to have been abandoned. At the fringes of the interminable rail lines, the view was partially blocked by a nimbus of coal dust spewed forth by factory chimneys. The stench of unctuous burner oil permeated and soured the air. Rare

glimmers of electric light falteringly shone through the smog-laden sky, then extinguished their timid glitter as if reminded that this was a blackened out city, the city of Breslau. Breslau was assigned to Poland after the war and renamed Wroclaw. The city is set in a rich agricultural and mining district with an important railway centre. Breslau boasted iron foundries and smelters and flanking both sides of the Oder River which linked it to the Baltic Sea.

It was now around seven o'clock in the evening. The guards had brought our supper to us from the mess wagon. We ate in silence expecting drastic changes in our situation to occur at any moment. I looked through the grill of one of the wagon's portholes. The railway yard was shrouded in complete darkness had it not been for the dark red glow of small lanterns affixed to the cabooses of transports.

On one side of the tracks at a point of about two kilometres was a row of squat two-storey buildings. A sliver of light seeped through thin slits of dark paper that was on the windows. I assumed that these buildings were used for official functions. A sharp, insistent banging on the wagon's door jolted us from our reflections. It was Bajor, now a corporal, who had been Mr Sergeant Hajdu's orderly. Bajor called out to me, "Matyi, I've got orders to take you to our commander." It was unclear which officer he had meant by this appellation, although he liaised mostly for Hajdu. I had already met him a few times and taken a liking to this former farmer of German stock. The Hungarians would call them Svabians, who lived in well scrubbed villages around the hills of Budapest. He was a taciturn, well-mannered, decent fellow with a rosy, cherubic face. He spoke some German and searched out opportunities to hone his language skills with me. This time he was quieter and more sombre than usual.

"Matyi, it's not true that the commander wants to see you. It's me, I've got to talk to you privately in my wagon." He was in charge of a box car crammed full of the regiment's food supplies, uniforms, shoes and boots.

"Matyi," he said, while putting his arm around my shoulder, "I've got some bad news, but also some good news for you personally." "What is it Bajor?" I asked. There was no need for me to address him as Mr Corporal. We were of the same age and there was a feeling of camaraderie between us which I attributed to our mutual German language background.

"Yes, Matyi, a few minutes ago I had been summoned by Master Sergeant Hajdu. Several decisions have already occurred." "What are they Bajor, spit it out?" "All right, let me talk and don't interrupt. Master Sergeant Hajdu has been promoted to sergeant major. He's proud like a puffed up turkey. The other thing is much more important. The Germans have allowed our regiment to return to Hungary. They will allow the officers to take ten wagons back home. The rest of the soldiers will be placed on Wehrmacht transports which are headed for our country."

"And what about us?" I asked with concern creeping into my voice. "That's the problem I want to discuss with you. The bulk of our train, as you know, will have about forty wagons left and has been taken over by the Germans. They are stealing our train, all of our regiment's supplies, equipment, motor bikes, food, everything and want to send it up north, somewhere to the coast of the Baltic Sea."

"And where do we fit into this picture?" "Nowhere," said Bajor. "The officers want to wash their hands off you guys." "Well, that's just mighty humane of them," I said. "And now, tell me, Bajor, what's the good news for me personally you

mentioned before?" "All right Matyi, here's where you come in. Sergeant Major Hajdu, I've got to get used to calling him that, has been ordered by our lieutenant colonel to ride the train, together with a platoon of us artillery men up north to the sea." "Yes, and what?" I asked impatiently. "Sergeant Major Hajdu wants you to come along. He knows that you are fluent in German and he could use you. We all can use you in getting back to Hungary." "And how does he think that I can help you proud artillery men? Me a KMSZ. Look at my crazy clown's outfit with all the coloured patches. Don't you think the Germans would ask who the hell this fellow in the beggar's clothes is?"

"All right Matyi, here's another piece of good news for you. Sergeant Major Hajdu, not that he's happy about it, might give you a regular army uniform and a soldier's pass book with your name in it." "Well, that's surprising," I said, "but I'll go along with it. The only thing I can't agree with is that he wants to dump all the other KMSZ. You know very well that will be the end of them." "I can't do anything about that Matyi. They don't want you guys around any longer. They are afraid to hide your gang any longer."

I sat silently, leaning against a heap of clothes and was mulling about the forthcoming events. Then a thought struck me, "Tell me Bajor, when is the regiment supposed to transfer to the German transport?" "As far as I know, around nine o'clock this evening. In about one hour from now," replied Bajor. I was hatching a plan...

He ambled over to a corner of the wagon and started digging for something. He pushed aside sacks of flour, sugar, bags of potatoes and dried vegetables which were piled up close to the ceiling. Apparently, he had found what he was searching

for. With a conspiratorial smile, he said, "Here Matyi, take this," and he handed over six loaves of bread and a large side of smoked bacon which I reckoned must have weighed ten killogrammes.

"Come on now," he said, "put this stuff into a blanket and let's take it to your friends." We slowly opened the wagon's door, peeked around to make sure that no one was observing us and hurried to my place which, being next to Bajor's lodging, was at the rear of the train. Luckily, no one saw us as the soldiers were assembling their gears in their box cars.

"Here's something for you," said Bajor, as we handed the food over to Gajdos. Everyone looked at us with questioning eyes as to the reason for this bonanza. I did not want to give an explanation, or relate what Bajor had told me until I had a plan sorted out in my mind. "Matyi has to come back with me," said Bajor, and we left as speedily as we had come.

"Let me find some footwear for you," said Bajor, as we got back to his biliet. He looked at the pitiful pretense of shoes on my feet and observed, "I can't understand how you were able to walk in them." The soles of my shoes were partially detached from the uppers and were flapping wide open revealing my toes not unlike teeth in the yawning jaws of a predatory fish. My footwear, after having served for hundreds of kilometres as an adjunct to my *'apostle's horse,'* were, *kaput*.

Bajor had found a pair of short army boots which he flung at me from the top of a pile of shoes, together with a swaddling of flannel to wrap around my feet. "Now," he said with a satisfied smile, "you'll look more like a normal human being." Happily I set out to lace the boots when an unexpected heavy jolt bumped us off our seats.

The wagons lurched forward as they were suddenly pulled and pushed by our front and rear end locomotives. We jumped to the door and saw that our train moved uphill, until it came to an abrupt halt.

All around it was dark and a ghostly white fog cover seemed to have entrapped the stench from the city's foundries and chimneys, blanketing the rail yard with an acrid, foul smell.

"What's going on here?" Bajor was thinking out loud while he motioned toward the head locomotive which was being decoupled from the transport. A small number of railway workers busied themselves in de-linking wagons. After a lapse of a few minutes, our rear end locomotive started pushing and then box cars, including the officer's coach, rolled down the shunting decline and finally came to a halt at a distant rail line.

Slowly, belching short puffs of smoke from its funnel, the locomotive pushed the remaining long line of wagons toward the crest of the hill, until by the force of gravity, the train wheeled down to another track.

"Look back at the locomotive," I nudged Bajor disheartedly, "it's pushing my wagon all by itself in another direction. What the hell do you think they are up to?" Bajor was nodding sadly, "I told you this was going to happen, they are getting rid of you guys. Don't try to get back to your wagon. The Nazis will have a heyday blowing your comrades away."

Twenty-Four

The artillery men alighted from the wagons, assembled into company formations and marched slowly, carrying their gears to the empty German freight cars. By nine o'clock, just as Bajor had mentioned before, the transfer of the regiment had been accomplished.

Sergeant Major Hajdu was taking roll call of his remaining platoon. "Stay inside here," said Bajor, "I'll tell Hajdu later that you are with me." "Really," I replied musingly, "it isn't fair that we should leave my comrades behind." Bajor became annoyed with me. "Look Matyi, do you want to save your life, yes or no? If yes, stop pestering me with your gang. It's enough that we are taking you along." "Yes, yes, I know, but it still bothers me that you guys are handing them over to the Nazis." "Listen," he said, "we are taking plenty of chances with you if the Nazis find out who you really are. Sergeant Major Hajdu could be court marshalled. Out here, there's no Hungarian authority to protect him." He spoke like a lecturing tribune. But I knew that he was right.

"I have to report back to Hajdu," said Bajor, and then he repeated, "stay here, don't move, and just wait for me."

"Say, Bajor," just as he was about to leave, "do you know by any chance what time this bloody train is going to get a move on?" "Sergeant Major Hajdu mentioned something about midnight," replied Bajor, "so we'll have plenty of time to grab a bite and mull things over." And as he swung down to the rails, he added with an air of satisfaction, "Actually, I'm glad to have you around." Then, he winked at me and

professed with an amused grin, "I'll make a soldier out of you yet," and scampered to join his comrades.

In one corner, stashed away under layers of blankets, were five wooden crates, crammed full of tobacco pouches. Hurriedly, I grabbed ten packs of this smoker's delight and hid them inside my jacket. I had been considering a plan for awhile. Now, I had made up my mind.

I waited for a few moments until the voices of the soldiers had faded away, the men were at the front of the transport, inside the mess wagon. I extinguished the oil lantern which, hanging from the wall, facing the door, radiated a yellowish, wavering light onto the regiment's stockpile of supplies. Darkness would help hide my presence from the soldiers.

Quietly, I pushed the wagon door ajar and jumped down to the ground. Furtively looking around and verifying that no one had noticed me, I moved along the tracks in the direction of the barrack-like building at a good twenty minute distance.

Thin lines of electric light shone through the lacerated masking material which darkened the windows. I had to find out who was in those buildings. I made haste, started springing. Bolted above the entrance of the largest structure was a sign with the inscription, *Head Office State Railway, Suburb Breslau*. I took a sudden, bold if somewhat hare-brained decision, I had to talk to someone inside who was in charge of routing our train.

I opened the door to a large, well-lit, ground floor office. Apparently, it was the main bureau. Six female clerks were busily tapping on typewriters, handling the

telephone switchboard and telegraph desk. In a wood panelled, glass-topped enclosure, sitting by a massive desk was a bullnecked, middle-aged functionary, bedecked in the black uniform of the Allgemeine SS.

I could not determine his rank, but I imagined, judging by the importance of his duties and the various service medals pinned to his jacket, that he must have been of a captain or major's grade.

The girls stared at me in wide-eyed wonderment and startled silence. Obviously, they could not solve the puzzle of my unexpected appearance in their midst. My multi-patched colourswatched garb further confused their orderly and well-defined thought processes which moved within the confines of strictly enforced Germanic rules and regulations. The intrusion, at this late hour, to all perceptions, by a raving hobo was unsettling.

The hulking form of the commander lifted itself heavily from the chair. He barrelled up to me, his face flushed and contorted with rage. His voice came growling up from the depths of his oversized chest, "Get out of here you dirty bum, no panhandling here!" Then he turned to one of the uniformed female clerks and hissed under his breath, not unlike a viper before striking, "Liselotte, call the guards to throw this tramp into jail!"

'Well,' I thought, 'I'll have to do something fast to improve my reception.' "Herr Sturmbannführer," calling him Major, I gave him the benefit of higher rank, "I respectfully report that I am an artillery man from the Hungarian transport which arrived a few hours ago!" His reaction to my statement could not have been more stupefying than, as if someone had informed him that he were of Jewish descent.

He dropped his mouth wide open, took off his cap, wiped his perspiring forehead, stammered and did not know whether to chastise me further, or admit, in front of the giggling girls that he had foolishly blundered.

He practically gagged on his saliva. "You, you Lumpazivagabundus," this was an Austrian literary character, "a Hungarian soldier you are? A Hungarian who speaks like one of us? A soldier in a beggar's outfit?" He was close to apoplexy. The girl started to dial for the guard house. "Hold it, Liselotte," the commander groaned hoarsely, "better call the *Narrenhaus* (mental asylum) and find out if this shabby creature escaped from there. An inmate who keeps on mumbling that he is a Hungarian soldier."

'Now, here I've really made an impression,' I thought. "Herr Sturmbannführer," I tried another tack, "my uniform is in that wagon which your command post has decoupled from our train. Our tailor is cleaning and ironing my service outfit!" The telephone girl interjected, "Herr Hauptsturmführer," captain was his real rank, "the lines are busy and I can't get through." "Never mind, let me talk to this vagrant here."

"You, whatever you are. If you're Hungarian, how come you speak German like that? Are you sure that you speak any Hungarian at all?" "Yes sir, Herr Sturmbannführer," continuing to elevate his military rank. "Do you want me to speak in Hungarian?" "I don't believe a stinking word you say," he insisted gruffly.

"Herr Sturmbannführer," I said while trying to maintain a soldierly posture which would countervail the suspicions created by my threadbare rags, "I have hurried here to have this wagon recoupled to the train in time. They sent me to you

because I speak German." "So what do you want me to do?" he relayed, in a somewhat less hostile tone.

"I have instructions from your officers to detach that freight car." "That was a misunderstanding, that does not make sense," I said. "We have to account to our commanders for all wagons, including the missing one," I maintained. "There's some logic to that," he admitted. "I really don't know why we should have disconnected that lousy freight car!"

"Herr Sturmbannführer," by now, I had become more self-assured, seeing that he started to waver, "if we don't report with all wagons, we will be court marshalled! Respectfully, I must ask you to have this carriage immediately reattached to the train."

"Well," he said, "I can't get in touch with your officers to find out if what you are telling me is true. Their train has left the station twenty minutes ago." "Yes, it is true what I have been saying. You know, Herr Sturmbannführer, our officers don't speak good German. It was a misunderstanding." "All right," he said, "I'll put you to the test I will," and now his voice was ringing ominously, "walk with you to that freight car of yours and see if there was a reason for having it detached."

I felt a tinge of triumph welling up within me. I had no doubts that I would be able to carry through this deception. In order to bolster my claims further, I asserted in a slightly miffed tone, "In Hungary, they would be more circumspect before cutting off a wagon from a military transport!" This was sheer brazenness on my part, but the situation called for it.

The SS officer put on his overcoat. "Herr Sturmbannführer," I said, "here's further proof that I am in the Hungarian army," and with that I pulled two packs of tobacco from my jacket and handed it over to him. A faint smile crept onto his face as he sniffed the pouches and smacked his lips. He examined the Hungarian lettering and declared, "Quite good stuff this. Perhaps, you haven't been lying to me after all."

And with an awkward gesture he put one pack into his pocket, and tossed the second to his staff saying, "Roll yourselves some cigarettes, try the Magyar brand!"

Everyone had become cheerful. We stepped outside the railway command post and were on our way to find the wagon imbued with *wanderlust*.

On the way we carried on a conversation during which I had to explain the reasons for being a Hungarian soldier and not a member of the Wehrmacht. The tone of our verbal exchanges had turned considerably for the better when I pressed the remaining eight pouches of tobacco into the hands of the Herr SS station commander.

He stopped for a moment searching his breast pocket for cigarette paper and graciously offered some to me. "Let's enjoy a smoke together," as he inhaled the aroma of the unfamiliar Hungarian product. His doubts about my army affiliations seemed to have evaporated with each puff into the air.

He also had time to expound on his theories about the superiority of the German race which, by the force of its genes, was predestined to rule the world. All the subhumans, such as Slavs, gypsies and foremost Jews, who were of no value to The Reich, had to be eliminated, or, at least made subservient to the aspirations of the

Herrenrasse.

I felt more at ease when, after having listened for more than half an hour to his ideological humbug, we finally found our wagon resting forlornly at the end of a spur line.

A slight shudder of pricklish excitement tensed my body as the crucial interlude of identification was to occur. I felt like a stage master who had to pull off an impossible act upon which depended not only his career, but his life. Should my comrade inadvertently reveal themselves to the SS officer as members of the outcast and persecuted race, then my charade would come to a fateful termination. Yet, I felt sure that I would be able to pull off the trick.

I pounded on the wagon's door, giving the familiar signal. At the same time, I called out in a demanding and insistent manner, "All ponem faces under the sheets. Mr Sergeant, you and your guys put on your uniforms and open the door. Trust me!" All this was said in Hungarian slang and *ponem*, a Hebrew word for face, was meant for my comrades. The SS officer looked at me questioningly when he heard my rapid-fire gibberish and then accepted my explanation that I had admonished my comrades to hurry up.

Gajdos, wearing his sergeant's jacket with three stars on its collar and the other guards thronging about him blocked the view to the interior of the wagon. The SS officer was sufficiently convinced of our identity to refrain from wanting to make a further inspection. Luckily, my comrades concealed their presence by having pulled back on their bedsteads and which were curtained off with blankets.

"Soldier's, all soldiers, eh?" asked the SS officer. Our guards did not understand his question, but wanting to comply with whatever he might be asking, replied in Hungarian, "Yes, yes."

"Sergeant Gajdos," I said, "this is the military station master and he promised to have our wagon reattached to the train. Let's give him a few loaves of bread and all the bacon we've got. He'll be our friend now." Fortunately, Gajdos perfectly understood the importance of a bribe and swiftly gave the food to the SS officer.

"That's for me?" asked the Herr Hauptsturmführer while pointing at his chest and grinning greedily. Gajdos nodded affirmatively whereupon the German made a rotating motion with his hands indicating that he wanted the food wrapped. Gajdos put everything into a small knapsack, handed it to the officer who acknowledged the gift with a curt but appreciative salute.

I asked the Herr Sturmbannführer whether he would allow me to carry the satchel back to his office. He willingly agreed to this suggestion. On our return march he became more congenial and even began to tell me about his family.

By a back door we entered into a private office where he stashed away the food behind a wooden cabinet. Then we went back to the main office. He gave instructions to the switchboard operator to put him in touch with the shunting yard foreman. The foreman was given emphatic orders to arrange for a locomotive to corral our wayward freight car and reunite it with the transport.

I thanked the SS station commander for his cooperation whereupon he replied, "It's all right, it is our duty to give a hand to our Hungarian allies!" Then he wagged an

admonishing finger at me, saying, "You better get back into your uniform fast, before someone picks you up as a vagrant." I respectfully saluted and rushed out of the *Kommandatur*.

The hands on the large electric wall clock were pointing at the Roman cypher I.

A cold and blustery wind had risen which roared over the dark and deserted marshalling yard. With bated breath I raced across the tracks, anxious to reach our train before its departure. It would have been calamitous, after having persuaded the SS station commandant of being a Hungarian artillery man to be apprehended as a tatterdemalion whose real identity would, thus be subject to denouement. Unexpectedly, a sudden cloudburst unleashed its fury spraying icy rain against my face. The heavy downpour obscured my visibility to such an extent that I had to rely more on happenstance than my natural instincts in locating the transport.

Propitiously, my groping sense of direction proved correct as barely a hundred metres away, spewing sparks of glowing, red coal into the air was our locomotive throbbing with hissing energy and casting eerie lights onto our train.

Again our wagon had not yet arrived. I pounded with the flat of my hand upon Bajor's wagon door and demanded to be let in. "Where the hell have you been all this time, Matyi?" Bajor wanted to know, showing obvious concern. "I can't talk now, Bajor, I am completely wiped out. I'll explain in the morning. For now, all I want to do is lay down and doze off!"

By now it must have been two o'clock in the morning. But Bajor would not leave me be. He insisted on prodding me for details about my absence. "All right Matyi," he said, "I'm not going to ask what you've been up to, but," and now his voice took on a strident tone, "I hope that you didn't try to get in touch with your good-for-nothing bunch?" I ignored his queries for he started to rub me the wrong way, and proceeded to stretch out on a pile of blankets for a much deserved shut-eye.

"Wait a moment, Matyi," said Bajor, who continued to grate my nerves with his incessant prattle. "Here's something for you," he said, pointing to a pile of artillery uniforms. "Get out of your stinking rags right away. Sneak on a pair of trousers and jacket which are becoming to a Hungarian soldier."

I was flabbergasted by his offer, which, Sergeant Major Hajdu had, as yet, not authorized. Bajor was audaciously disregarding his culpability in colluding with a slave labourer, but also showed his unspoiled altruism. I was overcome with joy at Bajor's kindheartedness.

"As soon as the train is rolling in the countryside, I want you to throw out your shabby rags," he said. "I don't want any lousy rags in my wagon," insisted Corporal Bajor with a conspiratorial smile. "Now that you have become a soldier," he continued, visibly thrilled at his newly found role of gratuitous haberdasher, "I'll let you sleep for awhile. But don't snore, I don't like that!" Well this fellow seemed to possess, as the Germans would say, a *Galgenhumor*, or gallows' humour.

Some of my prejudices started to dissipate. "Thanks Bajor," I said with warmth in my voice, "thanks again. I won't forget you for this. You are really a nice guy." And then, adding in a teasing tone, I spurted, "It seems that there are decent

people, even among Swabians." Bajor was not offended. He took this ambiguous comment in a good natured stride.

"Hey, hey Matyi, don't get uppity with me just because some of my German kinfolk are bloody bastards." "Okay, okay Bajor, I was just ribbing you. You know that I like you a lot. If all the soldiers were like you, we wouldn't be in a frigging funk, like we are." "Now, let's shut up," said Bajor, "it's about time that we get some sleep."

A short while later we were jarred from our repose by a sudden thump and clanging of wagon couplings. The train lurched forward. "What in blazes is going on here?" Bajor wanted to know. I had a hunch that the din was caused by our wayward wagon being linked, rather forcefully to its mainline of boxcars. "It is our railcar!" I said. However, I was not prepared to respond to Bajor's query in detail, nor in the mood to elaborate on the preceding events. A few minutes later, our transport puffed out of the station, heading north.

In the morning we came to a stop at a small railway post called Gross-Rosen. Bajor asked me to report to Sergeant Major Hajdu. "Present yourself to him and let's just see how he'll receive you in a soldier's uniform!" Then he added musingly, "It could be that he'll be able to put up with you easier, seeing you in this outfit. You'll look more like a normal person." Apparently, Bajor's military indoctrination was still in place, by regarding all civilians as being inferior to soldiers.

"Listen, Bajor," I said, "it doesn't mean a pile of dung to me, what Hajdu thinks. If he believes that I'll crawl in front of him, he'll have a few things coming." "What do you mean by that?" asked Bajor with some bewilderment. "Simply speaking, your Sergeant Major and the rest of you are depending just as much on me as I am

depending on you. None of you speak German. I do. Your division's stationary and rubber stamps are in Hajdu's wagon. Without me, you characters wouldn't know how to put those things to good use."

"Okay Matyi, you're right. If we hang, we'll all hang together. If not, we'll all try to get back to Hungary!" He shook my hand warmly. "Go to Hajdu and be smart. You know he's a henpecked, stupid moron. But he'll listen to reason. He has no other choice but to let you guys tag along. He must carry on with this tragic comedy to protect his ass. I think he'll have to claim that you guys are Hungarian farm workers."

This guy, Bajor was not stupid. He was surprisingly well-read as I found out from previous chats. His ideas were not bad, they only had to be put to the test. And the test's first hurdle was to come now. It was called Sergeant Major Hajdu.

The door of the Sergeant Major's wagon was ajar and it became unavoidable not to hear the shrill, captious voice of his wife berating him for one thing or another. Apparently, her husband had chosen the wiser course by keeping his temper in check as not one word had been uttered by him in rebuttal.

When his ungainly harpy took a momentary respiratory pause in her harangues, I took this opportunity, after having cleared my throat discreetly, to offer my respectful services to the Mr Sergeant Major. "Who the hell are you?" he enquired with a sarcastic frown, "a new soldier? Thank heavens that I don't see any more of your kind around." He continued in a stern voice, "I hope that you fully understand and appreciate what I am doing for you." Without waiting for an answer, he added, "From now on you will have to liaison discretely between us and the Germans. Your

job will be to get us back home. I will let you act on your own as long as you are acting in our interest." He scrutinized my expressions intently and then tapping the holster of his revolver, he blurted out his final ukase, "If you won't carry my orders through successfully, I'll simply put a bullet through your head."

"A cheerful welcome this was," I thought. I would have to reveal to him my exploits of the last few hours. "Mr Sergeant Major, I have already acted in good faith to serve our common interest." "What kind of claptrap is this?" he wanted to know. "Do you know Mr Sergeant Major why there was a delay in the departure of our train?" "I haven't the faintest idea," he grumbled. "Well, last night, I had spoken to the SS station commander at Breslau and he decided thereafter to reattach our wagon to the rest of the artillery convoy."

His face had turned ashen grey while he approached me with menacing gestures. "How in the devil's name have you accomplished this?" he castigated. "I advised the SS officer that this wagon belonged to the complement and that it had been a mistake in the first place to have it decoupled from the transport."

"Well, I must say you always come up with some fancy machinations." This was an ambiguous praise, more like an ill-tempered rebuke. In my mind I could not concur with the negative perception of his remarks for there was no other method available than the game of deception to rescue us from the threat of identity revelation. I was sure that this valiant soldier's, narrow-minded precepts, would have seen no different solution for himself, had he been in my situation.

Mr Sergeant Major had to take extreme care to repeat this respectful address, several times, even during the most insipid dialogue, "It was in everyone's interest

to have my comrade's wagon reattached." "What in blazes do you mean by that?" He brimmed with unrelenting hostility. "Just imagine if the Germans had found out that you brought along forced labour servicemen as part of your regiment, they most certainly would have accused you, Mr Sergeant Major, of sheltering Jews. And you know what that would have meant!" Fortunately he started to simmer down and listened more attentively to my reasoning.

"Now, in the centre of Germany," I said, "it is too late to act otherwise than accept us for enlisted men under your command." "What do you mean by 'too late?'" Hadju was still railing. He glared at me with a puzzled expression in his blood-shot eyes. "The best thing for everyone," I continued, "is to act as a close-knit unit and for this reason," and now I was ready to present him with my trump card, "I am asking you to issue army uniforms to all KMSZ." And not giving him a chance to remonstrate, "together with proper military identification passes."

Those brazen suggestions were too much for Hadju to stolidly accept. He drew his pistol from its holster, his hands trembling from a paroxysm of rage and bolted toward me with menacing gestures. "You scheming scum of the earth," he spurted forth, "you are going to have us all killed." He was fidgeting with his handgun. "I have made up my mind to shoot you dead, right now!"

I stood at rigid attention, not uttering a word, thus giving the impact of his words more credibility. I knew, instinctively that he would not carry out his threat for he was depending on my services. His outburst was more for the effect it would have on his wife and also to let him pacify his inner turbulence.

He furiously paced the floor while rolling his eyes as if under an epileptic attack. Nevertheless I felt confident that he would settle down, once the logic of my presentations had sunk in.

"Look here you," he said with scorn and rancour in his voice, "I've decided to let you live. You can come along, but not the others. I don't need additional problems. You are not only giving me problems and a constant pain in the butt, but I think you'll get me before a military war tribunal yet."

As a recurring thought and noticing that he was still uselessly playing with his pistol, he, half seriously, half mockingly proclaimed, "I think I'll shoot you just the same. I think that I'll be better off without you." Surely by now this was an empty scare tactic. He trudged to the other end of the wagon where his wife sat on their celestial bed. He sought out her counsel and searched for her solace. Hajdu most probably was a worthy, professional soldier. But undoubtedly his slovenly, obese wife was his superior officer.

"Mr Sergeant Major," I pleaded, "you know that you and your platoon need me. I know that it would have been easier for you without my comrades. But now that they are here, believe me it's the best thing to keep quiet about them. Give them the military uniforms and tell your men to shut up about them."

"Shoot him, shoot him he's the devil," screeched the vexed vixen. His better half, this roiling termagant, was tearing at her hair, ripping her blouse apart revealing an amazingly hirsute bosom. "We'll be better off without him" she clamoured. It was obvious that she was the more martial part of the menage. Even Puli, the asthmatic corpulent canine who had recently been promoted to the venerable position of

regiment mascot, taking a cue from his furious gasping mistress barked at me in a bellicose manner.

The Sergeant Major sat down by his polished dining room table, uncorked a bottle of wine and took a long drink. "Look my sweet," he said to his beloved, "calm yourself. I know that most of the time you are right and I'm listening to your opinion, but this time I cannot. I am stuck with these God-forsaken creatures."

For a moment she abandoned her shrewish protestations. "Let me think about this some more," entreated Hajdu to his household commander. Then, Mr Sergeant Major addressed me in a more settled tone, "All right Matyi, I haven't forgiven you for what you have done. But from now on you won't be doing any more monkey business unless I tell you so." "Yes Sir, Mr Sergeant Major," I replied, clicking my heels. "I'll follow all of your orders. I won't be potty again."

"For now," he said, "get out of my sight before I change my mind about you." And in a musing manner he adjoined, "As for the uniforms, I'll talk it over with Mrs Hajdu," and casting a furtive glance at her, "after she's quietened down." I did not want to burden the ill tempered couple any further with my unnerving presence. I then saluted and left them in a funk.

A few minutes later Bajor received a call to see Hajdu. Upon returning to our wagon, he told me that Hajdu had issued an order to distribute grey canvas army work tunics among my comrades. This decision carried the portents both of calamity or success. Bajor and I wrapped the uniforms into blankets and carried them over to my comrades. Our arrival and the allotment of fatigue clothes was received with pleasurable disbelief and then with gushing elation.

Only our overlords, the valiant guards did not partake in the general mirth. My colleagues doffed their torn garb and pridefully donned their army uniforms. Our guards' feelings were ruffled by the sight of their charges wearing military outfits and thus symbolically diminishing their own prideful status. "Hey you malingerers," called out sergeant Gajdos reprovingly, "don't you get any high falutin' ideas that you are something other than bloody KMSZ. For sure, you are not soldiers, you still answer to us."

There was no point in discussing this matter with him to any extent. To some degree, the only thing we were certain of was the uniform protected us from betrayal by the colluding army personnel. Okos-Domonkos was, more than anyone else in high spirits. The sartorial metamorphosis, while proudly prancing about in a his army tunic, gave his features an ethereal glow. He was no longer a doomsday prophet, he expounded optimistic rationales for our survival.

As for myself, I had never given up hope entirely. I was always filled with an unexplainable psychic certitude that I would get through the war years unscathed. I am convinced that this unfathomable, possibly illogic conviction helped me to overcome difficulties and maintained trust in ultimate salvation.

Twenty-Five

Before we left Gross-Rosen, a few more changes occurred. Fazekas, our cook was transferred to the mess wagon. He had been appointed *totum factum* of a fully equipped field kitchen. According to Bajor, it contained abundant staples of flour, sugar, bacon, canned food, marmalade, bread and a few barrels of Hungarian brandy. Sergeant Major Hajdu, intent on hoarding the large supply of provisions from the eyes of the Germans, gave orders to have about one hundred sacks of flour, granulated sugar and dried legumes camouflaged from discovery by stashing them underneath blankets. Hajdu was determined to prevent the Wehrmacht or SS from confiscating food.

As a surprise gift we were awarded a five litre canister of brandy, which, according to Sergeant Major Hajdu, was better to be consumed by our guards and ourselves. Hajdu wanted to thumb his nose at the Germans, who heretofore, had shown little respect for his rank.

We were promised that our first meal, which was to be a delectable one, would be distributed before we were to reach the city of Posen in Poland (Poznan after the war).

We had no idea as to Gross-Rosen's sinister significance. It was only after the war that we became aware of the dimension of our good fortune in having avoided incarceration at this odious concentration camp. The state of existence at this slave labour prison was appalling, starvation was a daily event.

Friedrich Flick supposedly the richest man in Nazi Germany, industrial baron, private paymaster and confidant of Reichsführer der SS Heinrich Himmler, drew many of his slave workers from the Gross-Rosen camp. These Jewish wretches were sent to Flick's Dynamit-Nobel ammunition plants which he had acquired from Alfred Nobel. The same Swedish chemist who had bequeathed an annual award for the advancement of the sciences, arts and the propagation of world peace. However, it was for the promotion of torture and murder that Flick's Dynamit-Nobel trapped the readily available masses of Jewish slaves.

Other giant German industrial concerns, such as BMW (Bayerische Motorwerke), Daimler-Benz, manufacturer of the Mercedes, which was acquired by Flick after the war, the Krupp works, and the plutocratic electrical manufacturers such as Siemens, Telefunken and ASG sought out and exploited free slave labour from concentration prisons like Gross-Rosen, Dachau, Buchenwald and Auschwitz. The I.G. Farben industrial cartel had a synthetic rubber (buna) plant conveniently located at Auschwitz.

Sergeant Major Hajdu ordered me to take up billets again in my old wagon. Those of my comrades who denoted Semitic characteristics were instructed not to venture outside their quarters. The ambiance in our life had changed from a sense of despair and hopeless fatalism to a kind of utopian resurgence of optimism. Forgotten was the nadir of pessimism when my comrades garbed in the frayed rags, shunted off in an isolated box car, were waiting for entrapment by the Nazis. Everyone was now overtaken by an incongruous conviction that we would be able to pull off our masquerade and safely return to Hungary. We also felt like bit players in a live arena where everyone had to know his lines and was not allowed to blunder.

In these events, filled with danger, suspense, good luck and sheer bravado, I was, as fate would have willed it, to play a principal if unexpected role. Our commander, Sergeant Major Hajdu, was counting on my knowledge of the German language and psyche and my further adaptability to unforeseen circumstances as evidenced by my intervention with the Breslau station commandant. It must also be said that I enjoyed my new functions.

The more often that I successfully carried out assignments, my assuredness grew proportionally. I noticed that assertiveness on my part contributed to smoother transactions with the Germans. Our Nazi antagonists understood only decisiveness, brusqueness and disciplined soldierly comportment. I made an intense effort to *out-German* the Germans. And it seemed to work. They did not doubt my words or actions. After all, was I not a member of the allied Hungarian army? I could not escape the flippant notion that I was a major Hollywood actor, performing in a real life presentation, worthy of an Academy Award.

Our train had been progressing through Schlesien (Silesia). At most railway junctions, huge mounds of bituminous coal were visible which was to be utilized for industrial complexes, supporting the war effort, where "the wheels were rolling for victory," (die Räder rollen für den Sieg).

As we approached the territories of Pommern (Pomerania), which were part of Prussia, the landscape became more agricultural. Vast stretches of potato and cabbage fields abounded. The progress of our train was constantly delayed by German troop transports.

It was only two days after that we came to a halt at a Wehrmacht barrack, sprawling over a large area adjacent to the main railway station of Posen. This city of 400,000 was the centre of a vast railway network, straddling the shores of the Warthe River, hub of major industrial and commercial activities and the site of an infamous 1943 address by Himmler. He referred to the Final Solution of the Jewish problem and exulted with his SS generals in the worthwhile effort to exterminate the Jewish race which this endeavour would become a page of glory in our history.

Sergeant Major Hajdu summoned me to his wagon. "Matyi," he said musingly, "we should try to get some food from the Wehrmacht." "How should we go about it?" I demanded to know. "Well," he averred, "you're the one who speaks German, so it's up to you to find a way." "All right Mr Sergeant Major," I countered, "however, there are two things I'm not sure of." "What's this?" said Hajdu, gazing at me caustically. Apparently he must have concluded that all I had to do is simply say *abracadabra* and *voila* the Germans would render provisions to us, the valiant Hungarians. "First," I insisted, "why do we need food from the Germans? We have plenty of our own. The second thing, would you be willing to sign a food requisition which I would have to translate and then present to them?" "Don't try to find problems," countered Hajdu smugly. "You're the clever one. Don't talk to me about problems, I only want to see solutions." "Yes sir," I said obligingly, anticipating further comments. "Food, we have," he said, "but our bread is getting stale and mouldy. If these confounded Germans can grab our train and supplies, let them at least give us some grub." I could not agree with him more on this point.

Then he continued, "As far as signing a paper for this purpose, that is not a problem. I'll sign the damn paper any time," he said emphatically. "Yes Sir," I hastened to concur, "I'll tell Sallai to immediately draw up a paper and we'll bring it

to you for your signature in a few minutes." "All right, then," he said, "but don't forget we'd better ask for a weeks worth of rations." This Hajdu, I thought, is really getting into the act and enjoying pulling a fast one over the Germans.

Sallai had drawn up a food requisition to supply ninety men for one week. We asked the Wehrmacht to furnish us with as many provisions as possible, especially bread, margarine, sausages and marmalade.

Granted, we were a little excessive in our demands, for we had only a complement of fifty artillery men and our group of seventeen KMSZ, monitored by our four guards, it was better to err with a higher headcount.

Furthermore, we assumed that the Germans would not furnish us with all the food we were asking for. I translated the document into German, whereupon Sergeant Major Hajdu affixed a divisional rubber stamp and duly signed the paper. It was now up to me, together with Corporal Bajor and two enlisted men to see the Germans. We took along six blankets to wrap the food into and hurried over to their barracks.

A large, run down old one story brick building, having the appearance of a railway repair shop was the apparent mess hall. Raucous singing and laughing and the noise of clanging beer mugs seeped through half-open windows. Seated at rows of roughly hewn wooden tables were a few hundred Wehrmacht soldiers, consuming their meals. They greeted us with good-natured ribbing, welcoming us as the long-awaited allied soldiers who, would most certainly, turn the tide against the Bolsheviks.

I did not want to accept their invitation to drink beer with them, fearing the effect of alcohol would loosen the tongues of my companions. Instead we directly sought out the quarter master. A pudgy, middle-aged soldier read our request and without any further ado, authorized the issuance of ninety loaves of black bread, five killogrammes of margarine, ten killogrammes of heavy viscous brick marmalade and some faintly pinkish salami which reeked of putrid horsemeat.

We wrapped our take in the blankets, thanked and saluted our generous supply officer and prepared to take our leave. At the door he called us back. "Hey you soldiers, I've forgotten to enter the rations for you ninety men for one week on my release paper. A copy you'll have to show to the next quarter master." Then, busily completing the affidavit, he explained, "Here in Germany, everything has to be properly documented. No papers, no food." Stuffing the declaration into my pocket, I motioned to my group to leave before this officious German would retain us any further.

Sergeant Major Hajdu, reviewing our bonanza, expressed his satisfaction with our foraging remarking, "Fellows, everyone knows that we are a real hungry bunch. Let's store this German grub next with our good Hungarian provision." With a smirk he added, "just in case we don't have anything better to munch on."

Two days later we arrived in Landsberg an der Warthe which is about one hundred kilometres east of Berlin. This town of 50,000, a trade and transport centre, had won notoriety, or in Nazi eyes, a glorified past. In 1924, while imprisoned at Landsberg fortress, Hitler, for having led the failed so-called München Beer Hall Putsch against established authorities, began to conceive and went about producing his ideological and political manifesto which became the credo of the Nazi

movement, *Mein Kampf*, My Struggle. For us it was an uneventful stay by and large which, however we put to good use preening and prinking our newly found uniforms.

A number of German soldiers had sauntered over to our wagon, curiously glancing at this Hungarian transport. A dour looking, white-haired enlisted man wanted to know whether anyone spoke German. "Yeah, occasionally, if I can't avoid it. Why, what's on your mind?" I asked. "Yes, comrade," he said, a hopeful inflection creeping into his voice, "I want to know if you Hungarians have any tobacco?" "Yeah, we could find some. What do you want in trade for it?" "Well," he said, carefully pulling a wrapped little pouch from his pocket, "here's something I want to barter."

He displayed a small, finely carved wooden pipe with a nickel stem and lid sitting on top of an enamelled ram's head. It was truly a collector's item. "I've made this myself," he confessed without any trace of overweening. "We people of the Schwarzwald (Black Forest) region have a tradition of wood carvings." I showed him a small satchel of tobacco. "Would you care for this?" He smelled its aroma with a connoisseur's fine judgement. "Not bad," he said, "I'll take three pouches for my ram's pipe." "Well," I replied, "I'll give you four, just to show you that we Hungarians aren't cheapskates."

He was flushed with joy. "There's a little thing though, I can't let you have," I cautioned him, "are the wrappings. No one is supposed to know where you got the smokes from." "All right," he said, "I understand," and he emptied the tobacco into his breast pocket.

All this, so it seemed, was good public relations. Shortly after a gaggle of Wehrmacht personnel arrived at our door wanting to buy tobacco with Reichsmark, or trade one thing for another. We had to tell them we had run out of supplies, not wanting to establish a reputation as tobacco merchants.

In the evening we were munching on German salami and bread which had a tendency to stubbornly stick to our teeth. The salami had a strange chaffy, decomposed texture. The bread was seemingly made of unfermented grain.

We spent another day at the marshalling yard and in the evening received word to advance to Stettin (Szczecin, in Polish).

By nightfall of the following day, after having travelled northwest from Landsberg for about one hundred kilometres, we arrived at Stettin. It was the capital of Pommern, part of Prussia, a city, so we were told of 400,000. We had passed through low lands which were interspersed by lakes and bordered by forests. The surroundings changed gradually by the time we approached this old Hanseatic port city, which bordered the estuary of the Oder River, a mere fifty kilometres from the Baltic Sea.

Stettin, connected to Berlin by a shipping canal, was a major port of the German navy. The stacks of tall chimneys, discharging heavy, dark smoke, girding the city, were landmarks in a multitude of heavy industrial plants and ironworks.

At dawn we alighted from our train having spent the night in a freight yard. A brisk breeze blowing in from the ocean was lifting the gloomy fog which was enshrouding our transport. We trudged about the rails curiously and glanced at our

surroundings.

Hajdu called me over to his station. "Matyi, it's about time that we get hold of some German food. Let's hope that they'll give us some better tasting rations than in Posen." "But Mr Sergeant Major," I protested, "we already have drawn food to last a full week." "Never mind, Matyi," he retorted, "it's rather strange that you feel suddenly sorry for the poor Germans. They are stealing everything from all over Europe and you are feeling guilty about getting grub from them?" "But they might find out," I replied, "that we already have received our allotment in Posen." "Never mind," he assured, "you haven't signed for anything before, have you? If they ask, you will tell them this is the first time we are looking for food." And to finalize the exchange, he said, "That's that, and get going."

Our typewriter's carriage trellis had cracked apart which made it inoperable. We had to make do with a hand-written food requisition. Sallai drew up a calligraphic document which Hajdu had no problem authenticating. The nearest food warehouse was by the wharves. Corporal Bajor summoned two reliable enlisted men to accompany me across town. Various battleships due for re-haul or refurbishing were moored at the docks. The piers were aswarm with sailors on furlough or getting ready for naval duty.

Huge cranes were lifting crates and ordinances onto the dreadnoughts and one U boat. Affixed to the outside of the large, wooden commissary was a vividly coloured poster depicting German service men warning the public of a shadowy figure, lurking in the background. You were cautioned not to gossip or rumour-monger, for he, the enemy, was listening ("Pst, der feindhört mit.")

Looking all around and seeing the eager faces of warriors, ready to serve the Fatherland faithfully, the paradoxical idea took hold of me that it was probably I, the lurking, sinister phantom The Reich had to be wary of.

We presented the supply officer with our food requisition paper. He peered at it suspiciously. "How did you ninety Hungarian soldiers arrive in Stettin? And why should I issue any rations to you?" he wanted to know. "It wasn't our choice to come here," I responded in a huffy manner. "The Wehrmacht had decided," I continued in a resentful tone, "that they could put the forty wagons of our artillery division to better use than ourselves. That's why we're here delivering the property of the Hungarian Treasury to our German comrades-in-arms."

These assertions were tinged with the appropriate measure of feigned injury and venal hyperbole, sentiments the Germans had become accustomed to from their subservient allies. The quarter master's apprehensions appeared to be allayed. He now only wanted to know whether we had obtained rations before. "This is the first time that we are collecting provisions," we affirmed convincingly.

"All right," he said, "here we have some potatoes, margarine, bread and kippered herring from the North Sea for you." We took what he gave us. Yet, we had a nagging suspicion that the German's generosity was motivated by his intention to get rid of inferior, or spoiled supplies.

On our return to the train we met a gang of Hungarian factory workers who were eating their lunch at a road side canteen. They had volunteered, by the lure of higher wages, to work in German armament factories and mines. Now they felt the sting of the Nazi superciliousness. They were treated like inferiors whose task was

to solely serve The Reich's interests. They were assigned overcrowded living quarters lacking in adequate heating and bereft of sufficient sanitary conveniences. The bulk of their wages was impounded by their benevolent masters who promised to transfer these funds semi-annually to their next of kin in Hungary. However, their relatives had not received any benefits for one year.

A middle-aged Hungarian sauntered over to us. "Men, are you going to temporarily stay in Germany, or are you here on some kind of permanent military mission?" "We hope to be back in Hungary soon," replied Bajor, without further elaborations. "Mr Corporal," the man was turning to Bajor, "you wouldn't want to refuse us a good service, would you?" asked the worker." "Well it depends," said Bajor, "what do you have in mind?" "Our letters aren't getting through the censors," said the man. "We'd like to write a few lines to our families. Be good sports, take our letters and mail them to our folks when you get back home."

Bajor looked at me questioningly. "What do you think, Matyi, should we risk it?" "There's not much risk with that. We'll hide the letters among our gear." "All right, then," said Bajor, "we'll wait for you to scribble a few lines but hurry up. Don't worry about envelopes, we'll find some."

They thanked us profusely for taking their notes and expressed their sentiments on how fortunate we were not having to remain in Germany.

We observed a tone of anxiety and palpable tension when hearing the conversations of civilians on the streets and docks. This was evidenced by nervous chatter, hurry-scurry fragmented comments and mirthless tittering. The ominous threat of an impending Bolshevik advance into the German heartland and the nightmarish

thoughts of raping, pillaging, rampaging, revenge-seeking Soviet hordes, traumatized the population.

The Soviet armies were furiously rolling the front lines to the west. They were fighting in the Baltic states, occupying the larger part of Poland and were battling the Wehrmacht in Silesia, Eastern Prussia and Pomerania. The Red Army, under Generals Chernyakhovsky, Rokossovsky in the north, Zhukov and Koniev pushing toward Berlin and Breslau, Petrov attacking Czechoslovakia in the south, were nevertheless facing stiff opposition by the German commandant Rendulic. Schörner and Kesselring were defending the southern sectors protecting Bohemia. Himmler, Reichsführer der SS was also put in charge of the Wehrmacht defending the north. In Eastern Prussian, Gauleiter, (district party leader), Erich Koch, vowed that territory under his jurisdiction would never fall into the hands of the Soviets.

We returned to our train and spent the next two days waiting for further routing orders. It was the first week of December 1944 that we heard of our next and final destination which was supposed to be on the coast of the Baltic Sea. We were not told of the exact location.

We arrived in Köslin (Koszalin, in Polish) at midday. It was a sunny day with cold winds blowing in from the sea. We were told that our wagons would be transferred to the Germans within a few days. The unloading of all supplies and equipment belonging to the Hungarian artillery regiment and division would be performed by two Wehrmacht platoons. We were resigned to a stay of at least one week. In the interval we were prepared to while our time away, rest, eat and sleep until the Germans would allow us to depart.

Hajdu had ordered our cook to use the stock of all good Hungarian canned rations before the Germans could put their hands on them. During our first evening meal, the scent of gulyás and the steam of hot marmalade drenched pasta, wafted enticingly from our canteen through the frigid air.

It was not long before a squad of German soldiers would be lined up in front of our field kitchen, having been unable to resist the alluring aromas. "Comrades," they said, "do you have some extra servings for us?" Sergeant Major Hajdu, albeit reluctantly, gave instructions that the Wehrmacht men be served. He must have considered that showing kind-heartedness to his allies would create good will. After all, the quality of our stay would hinge by a great measure upon their cooperation.

"Soldiers," he had me translate, "we don't have much food ourselves, but the little we can spare, we will share with you." The Germans, belonging to the confiscation detachment averred, "You are good people. Don't worry, we'll leave you with enough grub for yourselves." Thus, for the next few days, we had acquired a following of loyal guests who greatly appreciated Hungarian cuisine.

The station master had sent an emissary to Sergeant Major Hajdu with a request to furnish him with exact documentation of the contents of our transport. Hajdu did not want to declare the full complement of equipment and supplies. He gave instructions to transfer a few motorcycles, bikes, blankets, boots and canned goods to the billets of his men. He hoped to hide this booty from the avaricious eyes of his German allies. For this reason, a curtailed list of contents was prepared by Sallai, which I was to present to the military station master.

The next day I arrived at his office with an itemized register. The commandant was not in. His secretary, in her early twenties, a pretty girl, with large blue eyes, double-plaited blond hair circled her head in a golden-like aureole, greeted me with an inviting smile. She wore the uniform of a superior in the Hitler youth.

"I hope that your list is a thorough one, like we Germans are accustomed to preparing. I don't want to waste my time double checking the contents of your transport." These words were uttered by this radiant beauty without her being aware of the condescending inflections in her tone. It appeared that her training in the Hitler youth had endowed her with a haughty attitude toward non-Germans. I had to gain her confidence by proving that, we Hungarians, were just as thorough as the Herrenrasse.

"We Hungarians know that it is hard to be as perfect as you Germans, but we are trying our best." She failed to detect the sarcasm in my remarks. It was, however, difficult for me to sound convincing when Sergeant Major Hajdu had insisted that the curtailed list of tangibles had to be accepted by the Germans as authentic. He had explicitly forbidden me to mention his household goods.

"All right," she said, in an overbearing manner, "I hope that you Hungarians are not concealing any equipment from us." This comment presaged the possibility of a thorough verification by our *masters*. "We have given you as exact as possible manifest of contents. But don't forget that the Wehrmacht had not given us sufficient time to check every nook and cranny of our wagons," I advised.

"I'll take your word for it that your list was prepared in good faith and notify my superior officer accordingly. However, I must warn you that if we find any goods

which were not declared, your commander will be prosecuted for treasonable and corrupt conduct."

This girl gave me the shivers. Her dire warning was delivered in a sweet and dulcet tone as if to indicate that nothing untoward would befall loyal allies and dreadful punishment would only be meted out to saboteurs who tried to short change The Reich.

"We had," she continued, "an Italian military transport pass through here two months ago. Their commander, a captain, tried to hide some gold bars from us. We reported him to the SS military commander of Köslin. The next day, the dumb Italian was executed."

"Well, a fine pickle we've gotten ourselves into," I thought, "how in hell will we get out of this jam?" For the time being I had to pretend that everything was fine. "I'm sure that your superior will find everything in order," I said convincingly. Then I bowed courteously in front of the girl, clicked my heels in a more civilian than military manner, took off my cap and introduced myself. "My first name is Lajos, but back home in Vienna, I was called Ludwig." Her strictly business attitude changed visibly to a more congenial stance as a smile lit up her lightly bronzed face. She extended a rosy, alabaster arm which peeked out from under a white blouse buttoned tightly over her ample bosom and shook my hand firmly. "My name is Treuholde," she said in a flirtatious manner which contrasted sharply with her previously shown curt conduct. She was dressed in a taut fitting blue skirt, white woolen knee socks and heavy black flat shoes. An unflattering garb to say the least, but it did not distract from her feminine charm. I was wondering whether she had been hired for her administrative skills or her beguiling looks. Nevertheless, I had

no doubt that she was a zealous Nazi.

"How is it that you have a German name?" she wanted to know. She looked at me in an amused manner with her half-open mouth revealing full lips and pearl-like teeth. I circumscribed my background, omitting the obviously incriminating details. "So," she said, "after all you're German, just like us," she pronounced. "Yes, I would have to say that, in a manner of speaking," I responded.

"Ludwig," she said, and by now having abandoned her officious behaviour and becoming quite chummy, "go and take a seat," pointing to a chair next to her desk. I have some time to talk and it would be nice to speak with someone from another country. My superior won't be back before late this afternoon." She reflected for a moment and then started talking in a halting matter before becoming more animated as she carried on.

"I feel more at ease talking to you because you don't know my family or my friends." I looked at her with astonishment, curious of the things she would want to relate to me and not to her intimates. And then noticing my puzzled gaze she said, "Don't think that I have any doubts about the correctness of our political ideology. I think that our Führer is doing the right thing. We need *Lebensraum* (living space). We are the most industrious and intelligent people in Europe. First we will develop the continent for ourselves. Later on, perhaps in ten or fifteen years, the other people of Europe, who are inferior to us, will also benefit by our leadership."

She paused, waiting for my reaction. I did not make any comments, revealing neither approval nor disavowal of her remarks. It was obvious to me that this girl was mouthing Nazi propaganda. Encouraged by my silence and seeing that I was

patiently listening to her monologue, she carried on. "There is only one thing that I am not sure of, are all individuals of other nations inferior to us Germans?" "Say, why are you telling me all this?" I demanded to know, feeling a little uncomfortable with her revelations. "I'm telling you my thoughts," she said, "because I like you. You have guts and are smart like us Germans." Then she looked at me in a conspiratorial manner and professed, "I like your attitude. You are not afraid of presenting a list which, I am very sure, is not as thorough as you say it is."

I stammered something in mock denial. "Hush, hush, I know, don't pretend," she said. "All you loyal allies," and now she spoke in a slightly derisive way, "try to hide something from The Reich." Then she added, "I'll tell you something, in your shoes I'd try something similar." We were skating on thin ice. I tried to skid away. "Look, Treuholde, I really don't want to talk about this any further," assuming a miffed pose.

Then in a somewhat reproving manner, she said, "Look, Ludwig, if I trust you, then you should trust me. Don't question my motives, just listen to what I want to say." I nodded in agreement and let her continue expressing her thoughts which seemed to weigh upon her mind.

"When I was in the Hitler Jugend (youth), we were taught that all other races were inferior to ours. They were talking to us about eugenics and about maintaining the purity and strengthening our German race. We were told that the duty of German womanhood was to give birth to a proud, strong, brave and intelligent new German generation. Many of my girl friends did just that." She took a short, pensive pause before continuing. "At our summer training camp we were billeted near Hitler Jugend who were doing character building farmwork. We were encouraged to make

love with them. Many of the girls became pregnant. They were praised for their sexual diligence serving The Reich." I listened attentively but apparently there was more to come.

"I did not become pregnant and I did not want to bear the child of an unknown, unloved lout. I am of traditional, Catholic peasant stock. I did not want to be laid all over the place, like a rabbit. But then the influence of my older sister, Hildegard, took hold of me. She was in the NS Frauenschaften (formations of Nazi women) and I became like her. My sister volunteered several times to become impregnated and bear children. She told me, 'what's good for me should be good for you. You have a duty to serve the Fatherland. Find some SS men, if you don't like the youngsters, they will be happy to sleep with you, a strapping blond girl!'"

I looked at her with growing interest, what might she be leading up to? But I did not have to wait long for more particulars. I started having affairs with servicemen of different military branches. But, believe me, not all that love-making was enjoyable." She stopped again in her revelations while an embarrassed smile coloured her cheeks. "I've learned to enjoy making love, but not with everyone, not with all Germans." Now she stood up from behind her desk, approached me with a graceful swing of her hips, caressed her ample breasts provocatively and blurted out the unexpected question, "Would you like to make love with me?" This question immediately aroused me. It was like a sexual Blitzkrieg.

"Are you serious 'Holde?" I asked, using a nickname, meaning charming one. "You have quite an arousing sense of humour. Right here and now, during office hours while you are handling the telephone, radio telegraphs and train communications?"

She giggled, "Well no, not at all. I just wanted to watch your reaction, the Hungarian soldiers have quite a reputation you know. They told me that by continuously eating hot paprika and spicy gulyás the Hungarians can't stop wanting to make love!"

"Well, 'Holde, I'd like to have you in my arms, but we would have to find the right time and place for that. Wouldn't you think so?" I replied. "All right," she said, with a bemused expression and a trace of pout, "we'll wait, right Hungarian-German soldier?"

I must have stayed at the station commander's office for about an hour. I decided to take leave of Treuholde for our meeting had become too personal and torrid for me. "Thank you," I said to myself, "no Rassenschande (race dishonour) here for you." Furthermore, I was in no rush to meet with my new friend's superior.

Twenty-Six

An uneventful night passed by. At midday, I saw Treuholde saunter by our train taking a visual count of the rolling stock. I called out to her and she beckoned to join her at a short distance away. "Ludwig," she said, "I must warn you about a serious matter. I've handed over your regiment's inventory list to the station master. He had critically looked it over and grumbled something about the records being inaccurate. Then he said, 'it doesn't really matter a bit what these gypsies,' meaning the Hungarians, 'pretend. The Wehrmacht will take all their wagons and send these paprika heroes against the Bolsheviks on the Eastern Front.'"

"Hold it, Treuholde," this time I was no longer in the mood to call her by her nickname. "Is this all correct? I hope you are not teasing me." "Absolutely not, Ludwig!" she said in an offended manner. "Do you take me for a liar or what? About you making love to me, that wasn't a bluff either. I meant it. So be sure that I'm honest, after all I am a German. We never lie, once we've made up our minds." I did not quite follow the logic of her last sentence, however, accepted the version of the German's intentions to rid themselves of the artillery men.

This information had to be immediately conveyed to Sergeant Major Hajdu. I asked Treuholde to accompany me to his wagon. I knocked on the door and requested permission to enter. "What the hell do you want again from me?" hollered his eminence. "Don't disturb us now. I want to take a little rest from you guys. I've a pain in my back and Mrs Hajdu has to give me rubdown." He did not have to be more precise than that for me to know what the two lovebirds were doing.

"Sir, Mr Sergeant Major, I regret to be a nuisance to you, but there is something very important you should know about. The station master's secretary is with me, she just told me about this." I heard a loud cursing while he jerked the wagon door open. Hajdu was in his long-johns. At the sight of Treuholde he hastily closed his open fly. His demeanour immediately changed for the better. He acted less than our commander and more like a Lothario caught *in flagranti*. "Just a moment please," addressing the uniformed secretary. A few minutes later we were granted an audience with Hajdu dressed in his best military regalia. He motioned to the girl to sit down by the table while he ordered me to stand at attention.

"What is so important that I have to know immediately?" he turned to me impatiently. I started sketching the information I had received from Treuholde. Hajdu's face turned chalk white while his wife's visage changed to crimson.

"What can be done here?" he had me translate to Treuholde. "First of all," she said, "you have to give me an officer's word of honour that you won't say a word of what I'm going to tell you." She thought Hajdu was a lieutenant.

Hajdu stood up, snapped to attention and declared, "Any information which you will give me that should be of benefit to me, as commander of this Hungarian artillery unit, and my men, will be held in the strictest confidence. It will not be disclosed to anyone. On this I give you a Hungarian soldier's word of honour, so help me God." This appeared very theatrical but Hajdu was not above theatrics.

At least Treuholde felt reassured and said that's the only possibility for the impending orders to be rescinded was to directly contact the RSHA (Reichssicherheitshauptamt, National Central Security Office) and its SD

(Sicherheitsdienst, Security Service), whose city commander was an SS Obersturmbannführer (lieutenant colonel). Hajdu was struck aghast by such an undertaking. After all, he was only a Sergeant Major. How was he to plead his case in front of an SS lieutenant colonel.

I suggested that Hajdu give the secretary's proposition serious consideration and not discuss this matter further with the girl. Hajdu agreed. But, unexpectedly, he showed a chivalrous side of his character by inviting Treuholde for dinner. I was allowed to partake in the Lucullan feast to follow. It consisted of stuffed green peppers, soft noodles topped with ground poppyseed and apricot jam, all to be washed down with pear brandy. The girl eagerly consumed her meal, possibly not having taken part in such a repast for years.

Hajdu and his shrew treated the girl in an exceptionally courteous manner wanting to show their appreciation for her good offices. During the supper, Hajdu cast meaningful glances at me the reason for that I could easily imagine.

I walked Treuholde back to her office. At the door of the Kommandatur she suggested we take in a movie the next evening. She was interested in seeing *Pygmalion* with some of Germany's best stars. The film was presented as a comedy based on the mythological Greek sculptor who had fallen in love with his statue, the beautiful maiden Galatea. Theo Lingen, Adele Sandrock, Emil Jennings, Paul Hörbiger, Magda Schneider (mother of Romy Schneider) and possibly Annie Ondra (wife of heavy weight champion, Max Schmeling) and last but not least, Heinz Rühmann, all internationally known artists would contribute to an enjoyable evening.

Early in the next morning I received an urgent summons from Sergeant Major Hajdu to report to his command station. Upon entering he greeted me with the anticipated news that his wife and he had decided that it was I who was to contact the SS Obersturmbannführer, the city commander of Köslin.

"We will draw up a false document stating that we must report to our regimental headquarters in Hungary by mid-December, the latest." Then he added with a smirk, "Sallai is good at forging signatures, he will sign the order on behalf of our lieutenant colonel."

Hajdu was good at finding all the easy solutions for himself. The difficult ones, such as obtaining a hearing with the SS lieutenant colonel and persuading him to let us go, was left up to me. "Mr Sergeant Major," I ventured to suggest, "wouldn't it be a good idea if I were to accompany you to the city commander?" "Hell, no," he hissed furiously, "that's all that I need. It's enough that I've been sheltering you and your good-for-nothing gang. If they find out who you really are and what you have done, I'll deny that I've known anything. And that's it!"

"Mr Sergeant Major," I insisted, "they'll believe me easier and our request will have a better chance if they see you, a highly decorated, professional soldier, showing up." I was appealing to his pride, but I also truly believed that his presence at the Kommandatur would help, provided that he limited his participation to my prompting. My ideas, however, were waylaid by our commander's wife, his superior, as she shrieked, "No, no, you will leave Mr Sergeant Major out of this. It is your job and your neck." And thus were spoken the decisive words in this matter.

"After lunch," said Hajdu, "you will go to the German headquarters and see to it that everything will be settled to my satisfaction." For further emphasis, he added, "Hop to it." Upon leaving his wagon he admonished me further, "Spruce yourself up, get some money from Sergeant Gajdos for a good haircut from a real barber in town and get going!"

I was on my way to town. In my breast pocket was the spurious paper which was verified and approved by Hajdu, ordering our return to Hungary.

Köslin gave the impression of a clean, well-kept middle-class city. The streets were spotless, drab, soulless in a Prussian manner. The two- and three-story buildings were in good repair, showing bland facades without adornments, yet functional designs.

A sullen grey sky overhung the city. The gloomy expressions of soldiers and civilians appeared to mirror the leaden firmament. In a narrow street, showing a row of tiny, well-scrubbed storefronts, was a barbershop. "This place," I thought, "is where I will be spruced up," as Hajdu had commanded me to.

The small salon was bright, well laid out and smelled of eau-de-cologne. The proprietress appeared, and with her the dismal ambiance of the street appeared to have changed to a sunny cheerfulness. She was tall, blond and in her mid thirties, wearing a coarse dark green plaided skirt and a flimsy transparent short-sleeved low cut blouse.

Just as contradictory were her spright movements pirouetting around her swivel chair while she beckoned me to take a seat. She had the hefty appearance of a

veritable Brünnhilde, yet paradoxically the nubile agility of a belly dancer.

"What can I do for you?" she asked in a sensually husky drawl. I had not been in the vicinity of such an aggressively lustful female for years. Her décolleté only increased a throbbing libido's search for release. I gulped for an answer. She must have noticed my awkward excitement for she remarked in an un-German, siren-like titter, "You don't have to answer that, I can see it in your eyes. "Well, really," I said, "I didn't expect more than a good haircut and shave." "And that's all you're going to get for now," she said teasingly. "By the way, what kind of uniform are you wearing. Is it Dutch, Luxembourgian, or are you from Liechtenstein, perhaps?" she asked mockingly. "I am in the Hungarian army," I responded, showing a proper measure of indignation. "Oh, a Hungarian who speaks German are you? I like Hungarians, they are good allies," she remarked warmly. "I like you too," I said, "I wish that you were my ally," I said teasingly. "Ah," she replied, "you are good at flirting, but you're not the only one who likes me. All my customers from the services want to be friends with me." "This doesn't surprise me a bit, especially the way you're dressed. I'm sure the soldiers rather hang around you then tackle the enemy." "Yes, I know. Particularly when they find out that my hubby has been taken prisoner by the bloody Bolsheviks." After a momentary reflection, she added, "Those soldiers think they will have to fill in for him."

I had to tell myself that I wasn't here to play bedroom games with this woman, so I asked whether she was ready to cut my hair. "All right," she said, "if you want to look handsome, then just leave it to me." With this she started clicking her scissors and started to trim my untidy hair.

"When was the last time you had a really neat hair cut?" she wanted to know.

"Well, I haven't stayed at a big city, like Köslin for a long time, and I have never been to such a nice barber shop as yours." "And what about the barber?" she asked. "You're the most handsome barber I've ever had, also considering that all the others were men." "Hey you," she said, caressing my cheeks, "if you keep this up, I won't let you go. I'll keep you for a pet." "That would be all right with me," I said leaning back in my chair." I thought it was time to change the tenor of the chatter.

"If you don't mind dear lady, could we talk a little more seriously, I would like to know more about your city?" She seemed a trifle miffed that I wanted to talk about something other than herself. "You men are all like that. Once you get tired of making a girl feel good you start talking serious. What is it that you would like to know?" "How big a city is Köslin?" "Normally, we have about 30,000 people here. But now, with the refugees from the east and the soldiers regrouping around here from all services, we have about doubled."

And with this comment she had finished my haircut. "Do you want a nice shave to?" she asked, tickling my chin with her fingers. "You have quite a stubble there, you know." "Sure thing," I said, "I'd like to see how handsome you can make me." With a chuckle, she replied, "You'll see." She lowered my chair to its deepest rung and reached across my chest for a bowl of soap, a small dish of hot water and a very used shaving brush. She vigorously lathered my face. Then I asked her, "Tell me, which way is it to the Kommandatur?" She pointed out the window, "You see that park at the end of the road? Go along all the way, then turn left and another two kilometres down the road, you will see the headquarters." "Thanks a lot," I said, and then to make her feel good, for she liked to be reassured of her sex appeal, I confessed, "Sincerely, you're the most desirable woman I've seen in a long

time."

Indeed, in spite of myself I could not take my eyes off her voluptuous figure. She must have felt the intensity of my lust. "Ah yes? I know that I look great," she said. My skin felt pricklish, but fortunately common sense overcame lascivious desires. Besides, how could I forget the Nürnberg decrees? It seemed advisable to leave as soon as she had finished her job.

I must have fidgeted in the chair for she remarked, "Sit still, stop squirming around, I can't give you a proper shave like that." And to give her advice more meaning, she gripped my shoulder with one firm hand while locking my head between her ample bosoms and proceeded to give a close shave. Each of her respirations were accompanied by a heave ho of her swelling globes bounding and bobbing around my head to an extent that I had to close my eyes fearing I would become dizzy. I gave in to her administrations. Possibly her treatments were due to a good ally of The Reich.

Another customer entered. Apparently, a friend of hers and she became more businesslike. "Tell me," she wanted to know, "what are you actually doing here, in Germany." I gave her a short explanation. "Is that so? And you are going to return to Hungary?" "Surely," I said. "Great, that's great. Go back to your units and fight the Russians. Here we are going to take care of them. It doesn't matter that they are near Danzig, about one hundred eighty kilometres from here. We'll throw them back." And then her friend, or was it her neighbour, a walrus-mustached old man chimed in, "You Hungarians have to fight hard, together with us, to kill them all. We won't let them kill and rape us any longer. Those rotten Communists, they are not like us. We never would do those terrible things."

I just nodded to both of them without saying a word, buttoned up my jacket and just when I was ready to leave, the luscious barber said, "You liked the shave I gave you, eh? Come back any time."

The park was like an arboretum. From the sidewalk I could see an overflow of verdure, manicured lawns intersected by symmetrical pathways which were bordered by pines, poplars and stately oak trees. The pedestrians hardly paid any attention to me. One more strangely uniformed foreigner did not merit a second glance.

I was absorbed in my thoughts. How in hell could I expect to be received by an SS officer, not to speak of the city commander himself. And if this problem could be solved, I did not know, how or why would they take me seriously, dressed in the uniform of a common soldier, pretending to represent a platoon of Hungarian artillery men and a group of hangers-on?

The deliberations were momentarily set aside when I heard the patter of something following me. A German Shepherd dog pressed his muzzle against my thigh and licked my hand in gratitude when I patted his noble head. He looked at me with soulful, brown eyes, as if to say, "Let's be friends."

I thought that he might leave me in a few moments and resume his own trek. But apparently, he had decided to follow me. He wore no identification tags and I presumed that he had been abandoned. He was a vagrant who had teamed up with another undesirable being. Once in a while he would trundle behind me and then with a few great leaps bolt ahead, trotting before me in the direction of the SS

barracks. A large sign, erected near the entrance of the green spaces drew me closer. In large German wording and smaller Polish text, it said, *Verbot! Das Betreten der Parkanlagenist Hunden und Polen strengstens untersagt!* (Prohibition! Entry to the Park areas by dogs and Poles severely interdicted!)

The dog had stopped at my side and waited patiently until I had read the warning. Then abruptly he pulled on my leggings and nudged me forward as if he were sensing that together with him, I too was one of those creatures who were excluded from these grounds of repose.

The dog growled at the SS Hauptsturmführer who had attempted to stroke his head. "What a beautiful dog," he said admiringly, "but a little vicious. Is it me, or my uniform that he doesn't like?" "I think he has his own reasons with whom he wants to be friends," I replied. We walked alongside each other for awhile, the captain constantly casting wary eyes at the dog and occasionally mumbling something soothing to him. After a few minutes my canine companion had reevaluated the officer as a dog-lover and perked his ears when addressed by him.

"What are you doing here in Köslin?" the officer wanted to know. I gave him a short, circumspect explanation and mentioned that I was intent on obtaining a hearing with the city commander. "This is not as easy as one might think," he replied. "The SS Obersturmbannführer will not grant an audience unless and until the chain of command has cleared the subject matter." I had assumed all the time that a meeting with a higher-up would be little more than wishful thinking. The Hauptsturmführer's remarks only underscored this idea.

"Herr Hauptsturmführer," I asked, "could you think of a way to get a hearing in

spite of all the procedural difficulties?" "No," he said, with tinge of compunction in his voice. "I know how important it is for you soldiers to report back to Hungary, but nothing can be done unless our superiors agree to it."

We were silently walking along each other for a few moments when the officer abruptly stopped in his tracks. "I have an idea," he said, his face suddenly lighting up, "I am on the staff of the Herr Obersturmbannführer and I know that he loves dogs. His pet was recently run over by a half track." I was not totally sure what he was leading up to. "Say," he blurted out, "give me your dog and I'll present him to the commander. If he likes him as much as I do, he'll want to keep him. And then," now he smiled broadly, "I'll talk to him about you."

I was overjoyed. Providence seemed to have sent this dog along to ease my way into the sacrosanct chambers of the Herr Obersturmbannführer. "Thank you very much, Herr Hauptsturmführer, in the name of my comrades and myself," I said effusively. "All right," he said, warning me with the words, "*Eile mit Weile*," (haste with rest), "you'll wait for my words in the waiting room of the Kommandatur."

The barracks were spread over a large area. We proceeded in silence, together with the dog who, by now, had accepted the captain as another friend. In front of the largest building, the headquarters, stood two SS sentinels who in saluting the captain looked with astonishment at his two companions, the dog and myself. It was evident that they had never met supplicants of our likes before. We mounted three flights to the guard room of the colonel's sergeant-at-arms. The dog did not like him. He bared his fangs and snarled at the gruff-sounding, haggard, scarecrow of a man.

The sergeant threatened the dog with a bull whip. "Leave the dog alone," commanded the Herr Hauptsturmführer. "Odo," that was the name he had ingeniously christened our four-legged companion, "is a smart and sensitive animal. He only likes friendly people. Be nice to him and he'll calm down." The captain grabbed Odo's neckband and led him to his office. I had to remain with the sergeant. Ten minutes later the captain returned, his face shining with satisfaction. "You Hungarians are lucky, lucky indeed! The Herr Obersturmbannführer has made an exception and will see you in a few minutes. Be brief and to the point. Good luck!" And then he added, "I'll see you immediately after the audience."

The Herr SS Obersturmbannführer was seated at an immense, well-varnished oak desk, in his high ceilinged, carpeted, huge office. On the wall facing the entrance door hung a large painting, done in brilliant colours, of the scowling Führer of the German Reich, Adolf Hitler.

The city commander was a handsome, robust man in his fifties. He had greying hair and bushy, black eyebrows and medals pinned to his black uniform jacket. He viewed me with a haughty and condescending air. I halted at the door, cap in my right hand, clicked my heels and saluted with a brisk head motion, waiting to be addressed. He acknowledged my presence with a slack movement of his right hand raised in a half-hearted Hitler salute. "So, you're the one who brought in the dog?" "Yes, Sir," I said. I was not supposed to address an officer of his elevated stature by his rank. "What brought you here?" he demanded to know. "Sir, I respectfully ask permission to present a document from my commander." "Give it to me," he bellowed. I stiffly marched to his desk, put the forged document before him and then retreated backwards a few paces to stand at attention at a more deferential

distance.

He squeezed a monocle underneath his eye, skimmed over the paper and pronounced in a harsh, guttural voice, "I will take the proper measures." He did not refer to the disposal of our rolling stock, nor did he mention our pending transfer to a Wehrmacht unit. I was still waiting to be dismissed when he asked, "By the way, how is it that you are only a common soldier without any rank?" I could not afford to disappoint his valid judgement and had to come up with another prevarication. "Mr City Commander, Sir, my promotion to the rank of ensign has been delayed by the transfer of our regimental headquarters to central Hungary." He penetratingly looked at me without responding in any form. Now he lifted his hand in an imperial manner and said to me, "That's all."

The hearing had terminated and I was not any wiser as to our fate than before. I rigidly saluted by making a snappy, upward motion with my head, turned, goose-stepped to the door, then turned around as to plead for tolerance that I had shown my back to the Herr Obersturmbannführer, saluted once more and closed the door behind me. The captain was summoned to the commander's office from where he stepped out a few moments later. "The Herr Obersturmbannführer will send an inspection team to the train tomorrow morning." No further elucidation was given. "You'd better return to your unit now," advised the captain. I thanked him for his help and hurried to report back to Sergeant Major Hajdu.

"You haven't accomplished much," were the first words our dignified leader pronounced. "Sergeant Major, Sir," I tried to pacify him, "I think it was quite fortunate that the city commander allowed me to see him." "That's not enough," he countered, "we still don't know what is going to become of us." I could not resist

showing my anger and revulsion at his callousness and retorted, "If you had accompanied me, probably we could have gotten everything you wanted." "You, you, you nobody," he shouted, "you would have wanted me to get involved, eh, to put me in danger, you would have enjoyed that? No?" he countered. There was no point reasoning with him any further. Our valiant commander dismissed me with vituperations.

In the evening, Treuholde knocked at the door of my rail car. "Let's go to the movies," she urged me. I replied in an amused manner, "I can't just leave and go to town without our commander's permission." "Tell him," she had a twinkle in her eyes, "that I have to show you some important documents at my office." We contacted Hajdu. He showed great respect for the girl and gave his consent for my immediate leave.

It was around seven o'clock in the evening. The streets of Köslin had gradually become deserted, bare of pedestrians and vehicular traffic. We were sauntering along peacefully while Treuholde was recounting some childhood events and I was telling her about growing up in Vienna.

It was with astonishment I noticed that our early years were not disparate for we were the offspring of working class parents. We both had lived among people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds and had chosen our friends from these groups based solely on mutual liking. "Imagine," she admitted, unable to hide a trace of amazement in her voice, "my best friend was a boy of ten, the son of a Jewish plumber and a Jewish girl, I still remember her name, Hannah, who was the daughter of the local doctor."

She continued with her recollections. "One week before the Jews were rounded up, this doctor performed a successful, life-saving operation on my mother. As for the plumber, he was picked up at our house while he was busily replacing a cracked toilet pipe." "It seems that even among Jews," I interjected smugly, "there were some individuals one could tolerate."

Treuholde was in a talkative mood as we strolled along the dimly lit sidewalks. "When they took away my friends, I gave them both confirmation amulets. A ring to the boy and a pendant with a silver cross to Hannah." Then she added pensively, "I wonder if they are still alive today. I often think of them. It's a real pity that they were born as Jews, they were my best friends." It was odd hearing these words from the Hitler youth leader, yet it confirmed my long-held views that people ought not hate each other for the sole reason that they belong to another race, or religion. Individuals should be judged by their qualities and not distinctions, which politicians demagogues or intolerant hierarchy leaders erect. "We are fortunate," I commented to her, "that we don't have the problems of the Jews." I simply could not refrain from making this pretentious observation. After all I still could not implicitly trust her.

"Let's talk about something else," she said, apparently having become tired of dwelling on her reminiscences. "Like what?" I wanted to know, being curious whether she would now broach political topics. But no, she had something personal on her mind. "Ludwig, wouldn't it be nice, after we have won the war, to meet again? You have my address, we should stay in touch with each other." "I surely would want to do this," I said, "provided that we'll be able to find each other again." "Why not?" she replied. "I won't be moving away from here and the Soviets will never get as far as Köslin." To make her point further, she added, "The other day,

at a meeting of the NS Frauenschaften, I heard a middle-ranked Allgemeine SS diplomat bragging about the new *Wunderwaffen* (miracle weapons), V-rockets and atomic bombs which were being perfected at Pennemünde and other locations." And with a glowing expression she declared, "You'll see, Ludwig, we'll win the war shortly, and all the capitalists, Bolsheviks, plutocrats and imperialists will regret that they have started this world conflagration against us Germans!"

Her monologue had become a trifle tedious to me. Whenever she would be talking in a personal way she proved to be a likable, sweet girl. However, unfailingly, her political indoctrinations revealed an almost schizophrenic trait and she would be spouting Nazi maxims.

Loitering in front of a community hall were about twenty young men, mostly older Hitler youths, and others clad in uniforms of auxiliary troops. They were crowding around one youth who was playing martial tunes on a harmonica. They were laughing, good naturedly joking and jostling each other.

One among the cluster hollered over to me in a teasing way, "Hey, you, what do you have in mind by chatting-up one of our girls?" "Exactly what you would want?" I replied jovially, "if she'd be willing. But up till now, she isn't." Some of these youths were leaning on crutches. A few among them were missing arms and legs. Obviously, they had already seen action against the Red Army.

The movie theatre was full. The audience mostly consisted of military personnel, wearing the uniforms of different branches of the army. There was also a spattering of elderly people, primarily matrons who immensely enjoyed the comic relief provided by the cinematic luminaries playing in the *Pygmalion* film. They could not

get enough of the adventures of the king of Cyprus who had become enraptured by his creation, the sculpture Galatea, brought to life by Aphrodite, the goddess of love. We laughed duty bound, with the crowd who roared at the trite jokes of the mythological figures.

We left the cinema at intermission time, one hour before curfew. We had to make haste to arrive at Treuholde's parental home, a tiny cottage, near the marshalling yards. "Ludwig," she said, "I can't ask you in because my folks are wary of strangers. But next time, when my parents are away, I'll invite you to my room. And that's a promise," she said with a meaningful smile.

She gave me a hurried peck on both cheeks, I expected more than that. "Tomorrow, perhaps, you'll get what you want and with this flirtatious comment closed the small, bronze-ornamented gate.

Around ten o'clock, the next morning, Treuholde breathlessly arrived and advised that an inspection team of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt would arrive within the next half hour.

Sergeant Major Hajdu ordered as many rail cars to be camouflaged to billets as possible, thus, claiming exemption to confiscation. Furthermore, all personnel had to stay in their wagons with the exception of Sallai the scribe and corporal Bajor. Bajor would act as his personal interpreter to verify the exactness of my translations. The group of SS officers had arrived. They walked from wagon to wagon, climbing inside to verify contents, took notes, made no comments and finally arrived in front of our boxcar.

Our guards busied themselves inside our wagon while others leaned against the doorframes thus blocking the view of the bunk beds where our comrades were hiding underneath blankets. "Who's in there?" one of the SS officers wanted to know. Hajdu, who had accompanied the Germans, hesitated with an answer, now having cold feet, and tried to disassociate himself from us. He mumbled something to Bajor that it would be for the better to disclose our identity to the SS. His superiors had put those people onto the train in Slovakia. He was not in favour of this, but, orders were orders.

Bajor was fidgeting nervously, not prepared to translate the words of Hajdu. Before he could change his mind, I feverishly interjected, "They are a group of enlisted men and non-commissioned personnel of a Royal Hungarian bridge and railroad brigade." Hajdu did not have time to protest my interference for the SS officer calmly ordered all men to alight from the railcar for review. Bajor told our guards to line up while I whispered a shibboleth to my comrades that only those with semi-Aryan features should descend.

Ács, the carpenter, Finom, the barber, Okos-Domonkos, the half-Jewish philosophy student, Fazekas, the hulking assistant cook, and one labourer from Budapest, who looked more like a stone-age primitive than a shifty-eyed Semite, and last but not least, Vajda, the horse trainer, stood in a prim row.

"All right," said the SS officer, "you look like a strange motley of soldiers to me. Each one of you is wearing a different type of uniform, I wonder if your superiors can distinguish between you all or is it only by the size of your noses?"

This latter remark sounded to me a bit too ambiguous so I hastened to assure the

Nazi that our standard uniforms were not being worn for the simple reason that we had anticipated some engineering field work. He shook his head sarcastically, "It seems to me that you Hungarians would be wearing any odd rags your quarter master threw at you."

Another SS officer asked, "Are there any more men in the wagon?" "Yes," replied Corporal Bajor, "a few who are ill with dysentery." "It's all right with me," said the German, "I don't feel like smelling stinking bodies." And with this remark the SS had wound up their work. They summoned Sergeant Major Hajdu, who had slunk away, and informed him that their decision regarding the transport would be given later on. No reference was made regarding our possible transfer to a Wehrmacht unit.

Hajdu was disconsolate. He grumbled something to Bajor that these pestilent KMSZ were impossible to get rid of and he glowered at me with a most hateful expression.

Hardly had the SS officers turned their backs when Vajda, who had been gulping gobs of brandy the entire day, and now in a drunk stupor, brandished a penknife, rushing after the German officers with the loudly proclaimed intention to emasculate one after the other. Fazekas, fortunately was able to throw a crushing body check against Vajda which landed him in a puddle. "What's all the commotion about?" one of the SS men wanted to know. "Oh, they were only horsing around," answered Corporal Bajor apologetically in his broken German. "I think your men are getting restless being cooped up in the wagons all day," said the German. "No, we are quite happy now," replied Bajor, "they believe that we'll be going home soon." "We'll see about that," replied the SS.

As if to prove Corporal Bajor right, Vajda started singing some ribald Hungarian couplets wherein, at the top of his voice, he declared the German officers to be the offspring of whores who had mated with pigs. One of the SS men said, "I like this fellow. I don't know what he's singing about but he seems to be a happy chap."

He walked up to Vajda and asked him, "What's your trade in civilian life?" Vajda, who only had sparse comprehension of the German language, was groping for an answer. He wanted to tell the officer that he thought him to be a horse's penis, however could only come up with the word *Pferd*, meaning horse. The SS officer nodded affirmatively, "I understand, horse, horse?" And Vajda, in his benighted state, thought that the officer had understood him well.

The German walked up to Hajdu, "Horses, yes, we need someone who would look after the horses of our mounted unit. This fellow of yours, this *Pferd* something, would be the right person for that. I'm sure he would enjoy being with us, the SS and the horses!" Hajdu was aghast, that's all he needed, one of *his Jews* serving with the SS!

The German noticed Hajdu's hesitation and then said, "I'm sure that the proper transfer papers can be drawn up by tomorrow." Sergeant Major Hajdu did not dare raise any objections. After all, it was better to get rid of one more KMSZ than have all his men placed under German command. Two hours after the departure of the SS inspection team and while Vajda had sobered up sufficiently to understand his impending induction into the SS, he showed surprised elation.

"That will be just perfect, that's what I've been dreaming of," he confided to me. "What's so joyful about this? Aren't you afraid they will find out who you really

are?" I asked him in disbelief. "Oh shit, no! First of all I'm not circumcised, and I won't speak Jewish to them. I understand only a few German words. Mostly I'll talk to the horses and then only in Hungarian and Russian! Let them think that I'm a nut," he explained. When he saw me still shaking my head at the sound of his confidence, he added, "And at the first chance, I'll run over to the Soviet side!" Perhaps Vajda was not that stupid after all.

Twenty-Seven

Around eight o'clock in the evening, Treuholde came over with some important news. The station master's office had received word from the Reichsicherheitshauptamt that thirty-five rail cars, with the exception of five had to be put under the control of the Wehrmacht by tomorrow morning. The Hungarian military personnel were given permission to return to their headquarters in Hungary. These orders were issued by the SS Obersturmbannführer of Köslin.

Everyone greeted this news with enthusiasm. The Sergeant Major had sent for me. I had no idea what he could have wanted at this time. However, I did not have to wait very long as he subjected me to one of his usually accusations. "It is the fault of your God-forsaken gang, occupying one rail car, that they want me and Mrs Hajdu to share quarters with my underlings!" He stopped for one moment only to take a deep breath when he continued his harangues, "It is my wagon that the Germans want to take away. My wagon with all my furniture, my harmonium, my carpets, my dishes, my, my, my everything, they want to take away! If you stinking people hadn't shown up from hell to become a pest to all us decent Hungarians, I could have transferred my things into your rail car!" He was completely shattered.

His wife egged him on, shrieking support and their asthmatic dog, Puli, was barking in unison. "I'll shoot all of you!" recommenced Sergeant Major with is threats. He was utterly out of control as his wife had raised his shackles to a feverish pitch.

"Mr Sergeant Major," I said, trying to calm him down, "If you want to shoot

someone, then shoot me, not my comrades!" I knew that the smidgen of logic which must have remained with him would not allow killing the only one around who could be of further help to them. And I was right for he hollered at me, "You, you, I won't shoot you! But if you know what's good for you and your devil's gang, then you go to the city commander, right away, and ask for my wagon back!"

"How could I go now, late at night and wake up the city commander, Mr Sergeant Major?" "That's your problem. I've made up my mind. If I don't get that wagon back for Mrs Hajdu and myself, I'll spill the beans. I've had my fill of you up to here," as he pointed toward the ceiling.

I did not know how to countervail his absurd demand which were further underpinned by his next pronouncement, "You should have told the SS inspection team that I, Sergeant Major Hajdu, as commander, am entitled to my own railway car!" After a brief reflection he gave another order, "Now get going. I'll have Corporal Bajor tag along with you, he'll keep an eye on you."

We had circumspectly avoided the military police which were enforcing the curfew and arrived at the Kommandatur just before midnight. The guards could not hide their astonishment seeing us at this hour. After having persuaded them to let us see the duty sergeant we mounted the familiar three flights to the ante-chambers of the city commander.

We informed the under-officer of our mission and enquired whether we could see an officer with the authority to grant our request. "I don't think that at this late hour of the night any officer would be willing to listen to you. Aside of this, all staff officers

are presently in conference with the Herr Obersturmbannführer." We resigned ourselves that our chances for success were hopeless. It would have been more than impertinence and scandalous insubordination interrupting a late-hour, most likely portentous officers' discussion with the trivial matter of a rail car for Mrs Hajdu and her mate, the hen-pecked Sergeant Major.

"Listen Matyi," said Bajor, "you already have become a pain in the butt to the Germans. If you insist talking to them again, at best, they will throw us out on our ears. In the worse case, anything can happen." "So what do you think we should do then?" "Let me try finding an officer, out of curiosity he might want to find out what has brought me here," said Bajor. "All right," I replied, "take your shot." Encouraged, he asked the desk sergeant to ring up his liaison confrere in the conference room. Reluctantly, yet not wanting to send us away without attempting cooperation in the matter of our transport, the desk sergeant spoke to a Hauptscharführer. Corporal Bajor identified himself to him. The warrant officer had heard of us for he was the adjutant to the Hauptsturmführer who had taken Odo off our hands. The warrant officer transferred the call to his superior. The captain sounded extremely annoyed. "Who authorized you people to burst into the headquarters? I have a good mind to throw you two into the slammer! What kind of damn problem do you have again?"

In a few words, I explained the worries of Sergeant Major Hajdu' who, having served in the Royal Hungarian Army for decades, did not want to lose all his belongings.

"Listen you," the Hauptsturmführer raged on, "tell your Sergeant Major that we have other things to worry about than his confounded furniture." We listened in

stony silence. An orderly came with a message. "The Herr Obersturmbannführer is demanding your immediate attendance. Your phone conversation has to be terminated."

The last words of the captain were, "If the station master can find a decrepit tender, we'll give it to you!" and then he snarled, "you Hungarians are a pest. Get back to your transport this minute and don't dare show up here again."

We scurried out of the barracks before they would change their minds and arrest us. We reported back to Sergeant Major Hajdu who continued to warn us of the dire consequences should he lose his household goods.

At five o'clock in the morning, a ramshackle, open tender was coupled to our five rail cars. Hajdu had the contents of one box car, carrying supplies removed to the boarded up flatbed carrier. Thus, our brave commander, Sergeant Major Hajdu and spouse did not have to share billets with their underlings and could keep all their treasures.

This morning at ten o'clock, our five Hungarian rail wagons and the acquired dilapidated German tender were attached to a tired Reichsbahn freight train which pulled out of the Köslin marshalling yards. Hopefully, we were on our way back to Hungary. I did not see Treuholde again.

The train halted at a Stettin freight rail yard for fuel and water around two o'clock in the afternoon. Bajor and myself had again been successful in obtaining provisions from the Wehrmacht. I was leisurely consuming my meal inside our box car and

then took a relaxed stroll around the station building with Corporal Bajor. Seated on a bench and puffing on his short-stemmed pipe, was a middle-aged SS Rottenführer (corporal). With amazement he looked at our comrades lounging around our transport. As we passed by him he remarked to Corporal Bajor with an astonished expression, "Are you in charge of that bunch over there?" Bajor nodded curtly, not knowing what to make of the question. The SS Rottenführer winked at us with a conspiratorial air and said, "I know there are some people walking around freely in The Reich who should have been rounded up a long time ago. Some of them," and now he jutted his chin toward our wagon, "aren't that far away from where I'm sitting."

We did not reply and pretended not having heard his last remark. He seemed to have understood our silence. "Comrades," he said, "Better get back to that wagon and tell your friends to stay inside. I've already seen too much of this. Someone among us would be only too happy to denounce you all."

Again we could not let on that we knew what he was talking about, nodded only briefly to him as if in agreement, saluted and hurried back to the train.

Two hours later, we stopped at the railway shunting yard of Stargard-Wugarten where we were engrossed with an unexpected spectacle. Guarded by a platoon of Wehrmacht soldiers, cradling bayoneted rifles in their arms, were close to one hundred prisoners of war working on rail lines. They were driving spikes in a dilettantish manner, into the rail beds, shovelling and spreading gravel perfunctorily onto the grades. They were leaning indolently on spades and rakes chatting to each other and completely ignoring the German soldiers who, surprisingly tolerated their

provocative behaviour.

These men wore a variety of uniforms such as we had never seen before. Among them were service men who looked like British tommies dressed in khaki and wearing jauntily posed, fire-red pompom berets. There were nattily uniformed soldiers who, we assumed, must have been Americans and others with wider-rimmed, centre folded cowboy hats who seemed to us to be Australians.

These guys acted in a pronounced, nonchalant manner. A few sauntered over to us and asked in English, "Cigarettes?" We threw them down a few packs of tobacco. They seemed to be flabbergasted by our response really not expecting a gift from enemy soldiers. A hearty, "Thanks, mate," was their acknowledgement as the Wehrmacht guards, pretending not to have seen our donation, hustled them away from us. Some other prisoners thronged around our wagon, their hands outstretched for more tobacco. They were prodded on their way by the Germans, "Weitergehen, zurück zur Arbeit!" (move on, back to work!).

Our train slowly rolled out of the station. Two tommies, for that who they were, waved a farewell to us in a rather curious manner. They raised two fingers of one hand and made snipping motions. Selyem thought to have decoded the meaning of these odd signals. "I'm pretty sure that they were asking us for scissors to cut thread." Many months later we learnt that the prisoners had given us the *V sign* for victory.

The next day, without much ado, we passed through Landsberg and Frankfurt-an-der-Oder, a short distance from Berlin, where we spent the night. The following morning, we had arrived in Breslau. Our rail cars had been separated from the

freight train and coupled to the tail-end of a military transport which contained members of an SS Waffen brigade heading for Austria.

The oil lantern in our rail car cast a reassuring light at our group while our little iron stove, well stoked with peat bricks, spread a sauna-like heat all around. It was well past midnight and we were fast asleep at ease in the knowledge that, at last we were homeward bound.

The clanging and clanking of the rumbling train had muffled the insistent banging sound of something against our wagon door. The insistent tapping increased to such an extent that we could distinguish the assertive clapping of human hands. Could there be someone clinging to the rails of our wagon while the transport was in full motion?

Yes there was someone. An SS man jerking open our coach gate, peeked in at us and brayed loudly, "Heil Hitler!" He was on a courtesy call and excused himself for dropping in so late but had learnt about our presence just a few minutes ago. He was obviously in an inebriated state and gushing mood. We were in no position to bar entrance to this unwelcome visitor.

"Hey you fellas, you're Hungarians, aren't you and you're going home? See what a lovable bunch we are, giving you a free ride?" "Yeah," I said, "and the faster you'll take us back, the happier we'll be!" "Well, wouldn't you like to stay in Germany a little longer with nice people like us for company?" I had to humour the guy and was obliged to talk in the same bantering tone, "Sure," I said, "but because none of our guys speak German and your comrades don't want to learn Hungarian, we'd

rather stick with our own kind."

He sat down on the edge of Sergeant Gajdos' bunk bed, pulled a pack of Russian cigarettes from his jacket and offered them around. "I bet," he said encouragingly, "you've never tried these Bolshevik smokes before. Go on, light up, they last a long time! Ha, ha," he laughed out loud, "You know why?" he asked, "because they stink and you'll have to catch your breath before pulling on them a second time." He was very happy with his own good humour. He tried to be jovial and wanted to make friends. Sergeant Gajdos moved him over to our little stove where they sat down and offered him a large tumbler of pear brandy. It was important to put this unwanted intruder at ease rather than let him become suspicious, look around or ask searching questions. One offering of brandy was followed by another. The alcohol had its effect on him. He became boisterous and talkative. My comrades covered themselves with their blankets and remained motionless.

The SS guy wanted to sing *Wanderlieder*, which were hiking songs and sentimental love ballads. He asked everyone to join in and to hum along. When I intoned some Viennese *Heurigen-Lieder*, which were wine songs, he had become quite mellow and nostalgic.

"Once I had a Viennese lovey. What a charmer," he gushed. Then he stopped abruptly, closing his eyes in a sorrowful expression. "I had to leave her on short notice and all on account of those rotten Jews. I was a member of the *Einsatzgruppen* (SS extermination squads) and was ordered to do our cleansing job in the Ukraine. All those damn Jews we had to get rid of." He wiped his brow and in a drunk stupor continued to talk about his hurt, "If those bloody Jews hadn't been there, we wouldn't have had to kill them. It was all their fault!" And with a

mournful sign he lamented, "Yes, I could have stayed with my Annerl, but when I came back, my Annerl, she knew what I had done, didn't want me anymore. Those rotten Jews!"

He sat up and menacingly looked around as if he had seen someone in the dark corners of our rail car. "Those stinking Jews!" he railed. "They never know what's good for them. If they hadn't been in the Ukraine I could have stayed with my Annerl in Vienna." He dozed off for a moment and then awoke with a jolt, "If I'd see any Jews around me I'd shoot them right away, guaranteed!"

"Yes," he was ranting on, tapping the holster of his Mauser revolver. "You guys are lucky that there aren't any Jews among you. You'd see how I'd exterminate them!" His triads had exhausted him. The brandy had made him groggy. He had fallen into a numbing stupor.

"Matyi," Fazekas whispered to me, "let's throw this blood-thirsty murderer out the door." "I wish we could do that," I said cautiously, "Why not?" insisted Fazekas. Together with Ács, they dragged the unconscious SS killer to the open wagon door.

Sergeant Gajdos bolted over to them, pulling back the legs of the SS character which were already dangling outside the iron gate.

"Have you gone completely mad?" he shouted in a barely controlled manner, "I won't have you kill this SS character." "We only wanted him to get some fresh air," chipped in Finom, the barber, who had observed the proceedings, half-hidden underneath his blanket, with satisfaction.

"If you think that I'm as stupid as a donkey than you've another thing coming. Yes, fresh air! Ha, dead outside on the tracks!" protested Sergeant Gajdos. And for further clarification he added, "No SS guys flying through the air to catch fresh air while I'm in command here. You stupid dogs," now he was addressing us directly, "all the SS would be after us. All of us!"

We could not carry out our assassination plan. The SS humanoid, not aware of the attempts on his life, spent a peaceful night in our box car. In the morning, still in a half daze, climbing out of our billet and tottering to his own, pronounced in a wistful tone, "Our Hungarian allies, I mean, in this wagon, are good allies. Good friends, real Aryans, they are!"

The next two days had passed without any unnerving incidents. We found it advisable to stay in our box car and were also fortunate in not having to put up with another visit by our night-time intruder, the SS murderer. Sergeant Major Hajdu had also chosen to lie low and abstained from summoning me to his quarters. Everyone was only interested in remaining as inconspicuous as possible until we had reached the relatively safer haven of the homeland.

Our train had not been following the most direct route to Austria, due to the main line being in poor repair, following bombardments by allied planes. Logistic considerations required that we travel through Moravia. We stopped for fifteen minutes at the important industrial town of Moravska-Ostrova and utilized this short interval to hasten over to the Wehrmacht commissariat for provisions. Without delay we obtained rations of bread, margarine and rancid fish stew.

A few hours later, we had arrived in Linz, the capital of upper Austria. It was not far from here, in Braunau, that the monster Hitler was born. At the railway station, a group of German draftees, barely teenagers, struck up a conversation with me. They were eagerly looking forward to the victorious conclusion of the war, only one month hence, so they reassured anyone who cared to listen. For, the *Wunderwaffen* (miracle weapons) were already being assembled to annihilate the Bolshevist and Plutocrat enemies. I remarked that it was a happy feeling, indeed when one could be so certain of one's success. The lads left me with these breezy, confident words, "You'll see, in a few weeks, total victory will be ours, thanks to our Führer!"

In the evening we rolled into Vienna's Nordbahnhof (northern railway station). The city was under night curfew. Street lights were dimmed for fear of aerial attacks and windows of buildings were obscured by dark masking tapes. We remained in our wagon waiting for the go-ahead signal to Hungary.

In the morning, due to another of the unscheduled delays, we had ample time to requisition rations at another railway station. Bajor, myself and two enlisted men took along some blankets to wrap the provision into. On the street car we met the traditional Viennese whiners. "We are not happy with the Germans, and the Nazis only brought us grief," was the refrain of their complaints. "The allies should have listened when Chancellor Schuschnigg asked them to stop Hitler from annexing Austria. Before," so they continued, "yes, before we even got along with the Jews. Many of them were good citizens, just like us." These were the words I had already heard in my youth. The Austrians were ready to support any side, as long as it was to their advantage. No scruples there. But should the tide turn against them, lo and behold, they never wanted to be blamed for having been bedfellows of the

losers.

I remembered a tramway conductor, a neighbour in my childhood. A man in his forties and a decent chap, up until the time of the annexation. He had been a social democrat, a staunch trade unionist, who manned a machine gun position, firing back at Fürst von Starhemberg's fascist Heimwehr who, in 1934, directed cannon fire at apartment blocks. I mailed a postcard to him, advising of my passage through Vienna. I had a vague idea that he might show up and offer me shelter.

After the war, I met him in Vienna. He had served as an SS man and claimed to have saved many Jews in Polish ghettos. He asserted to me, "You are not like one of *those*, you're a Viennese." And then he told me that upon receiving my note in 1944, he had reserved room in a small cottage, outside town, to hide me from harm. I had my doubts that I could have trusted him.

Nevertheless, after the war, he secured a handyman's job for me at the barracks of the French Occupation Army and also gave us false travel documents to the US zone of Austria. I had a gnawing suspicion that his belated kindheartedness was only in atonement for his sins committed during the war.

In the evening I took a group of twenty Hungarian artillery men on a sightseeing tour through the centre of the capital. I had not been to my birthplace since August, 1938.

It was a bitter-sweet return to a city where I had spent a pleasant childhood, always

feeling at home, just like any other Viennese. It was only after the occupation of Austria by the Nazis that everything would change for the worse. Nevertheless, being back home, I felt elated and was brimming with joy. After all, this place was my town and the city I would have never left had it not been for those wretched Nazis. As I was walking through the well-known streets, I felt no fear of being apprehended, or denounced by the accompanying soldiers. The thought of not belonging here did not occur to me. On the contrary, my feelings were that of being back home, it is them, the German Nazis who do not belong here. They are the strangers.

We strolled through the Opernring in the Innere Stadt, the centre of town, and gawked at the imposing buildings with historical connotations. There was the balcony from where Hitler, celebrating his victory, addressed a jubilant crowd and promised a rosy future for the Ostmärker, no longer called Austrians, who had returned to the fold of a great German Reich.

A cosmetic boutique was still open for business. I entered and asked the female salesclerk whether she had ever sold beauty articles by *Emery*. "Oh yes," she keenly said, "we're still carrying them. They are one of the most sought after items." "Did you know Mr Emery by any chance?" I wanted to know. "Most vividly, he was a real lady's man, a gentleman of the old school." And then she added musingly, "Perhaps he'll be back after the war. He was Jewish you know," she remarked haltingly. "By the way, how did you know him?" she asked. "Oh, he used to be a neighbour of ours." And by this I did not lie as my uncle only lived around the corner from our place, near the five-hundred-year-old Stefanskirche, the one hundred-thirty metre tall St. Stephen's Church.

After we had passed by the Staatsoper and the exclusive shopping areas of the Kärntnerstrasse and the Graben, we walked across a Donaukanal bridge and returned to the railway station, not far from the Volksprater, the famous Vienna amusement park, dominated by the Riesenrad (giant Ferris wheel), one of the capital's landmarks.

The next morning our train was east-bound. In the afternoon we stopped at Wiener-Neustadt. Near the tracks was a throng of young lads, in their early teens, laying rail beams. They were Hungarian-Jewish boys who had been plucked by the Nazis from deportation cattle trains. A few among them approached our rail car. They looked famished. Furtively looking around, ascertaining that none of the SS guards could see us, we jettisoned bread and margarine rations to them. They were astounded by our acts and warmly thanked us, the valiant Hungarian soldiers. They had no idea who we really were.

We learnt from them that Jewish KMSZ labourers had marched through this town a few weeks earlier, among them a company of the XIII battalion. Later on we found out that it was our very comrades who had passed through here on their way to Mauthausen, a horrendous concentration camp near Linz in upper Austria.

As we were nearing the frontier, a lively discussion took place between Sergeant Gajdos, Lance Corporal Sebes and one of our fellows, the son of a former well-to-do Budapest business man.

"You know," said the latter, "once the war is over, I'll hire you two to work in my father's factory." "Why would you hire us when you guys were first complaining of how cruel we had been to you all the time," Gajdos wanted to know. "Oh, that's all

forgotten now," said our business brain. "You were decent chaps during the entire trip and I cannot forget that." "And how about us?" asked Hasas and Hentes, the guards. "All right, all right, don't worry," said our smart-aleck friend, "I'll hire you too. Hasas, you'll be our night watchman to chase away drunks and thieves. With your paunchiness and big mouth, you shouldn't have any problems. And as far as you, Hentes, who always said that we don't keep the latrines clean, you'll look after the toilets!"

The two dunce guards were pondering the offer and then wanted to know whether they would be given good wages. "Sure thing," our sage comrade said, "much more than we were getting as KMSZ." Sergeant Gajdos and Lance Corporal Sebes were smart enough to see that our friend was having fun with their underlings, believing that their employment chances were for real. Our comrade, on the other hand, was only misleading them, his sole intention being to keep the guards pliable until he could make his escape.

On the Austrian side of the border, our six box cars were removed from the SS transport and attached to a Hungarian train. Bajor searched for me and suggested to tell my comrades about his newest idea. "Once over the border, we artillery men will find a way to get to the Bakony mountains in Trans-Danubia. There we'll join Admiral Horthy's resistance forces fighting the Germans, occupying our county." And with conviction he added, "you fellows must join us. We'll give you regular army uniforms, not the second hand ones you're wearing and you'll no longer be KMSZ. You'll be proud Hungarian artillery men, just like us." I thanked Bajor for his proposal and told him that our fellows would seriously consider this idea.

Late in the evening we finally crossed into Hungary. In the rail yard of

Szombathely, a border town, we waited for further routing orders. Word came that our train would be heading for the Slovakian war zone within two hours.

Idling on the adjacent tracks was a passenger train to imminently leave for Budapest. Our two guards, Hasas and Hentes, had been given permission by Sergeant Gajdos to rush over to the border post to send letters to their families. While we waited for their return, we discussed Corporal Bajor's plans. We voted against it. Although we knew that Bajor was an honest fellow, we could not put our faith with the other artillery men. Should it come to save their skin they would most certainly weasel on us. Now that we were back in Hungary, we decided to play it by ear. And we now had to act fast.

A railroad man was checking the couplings of the Budapest bound train. I called out to him to attach our wagon, which was in the rear of the transport, to the one he was working on. He refused, he had not received instructions to this effect from the station master. I hollered at him, "There's no time to waste. We have to get back immediately to our Budapest battalion." He was still balking. For further emphasis I made a hand motion as if I were to reach for the holster of my revolver. Little could he see that I had neither one. "Do you want me to shoot you before you do as you're told?" I shouted at him in an apparent rage, hence he was duly impressed and persuaded. "All right, all right, Vitéz úr (Mr Valiant), don't get mad. It's not my fault that they don't pass orders on to me. It happens too often nowadays."

Sergeant Gajdos lent vocal support to my urging and leaning out the wagon door threatened the hapless worker with his bullet-lacking rifle. The railroad man hurried to follow our commands. We jumped down to the rails and helped disengage our box car. Ten of us pushed our wagon fifty metres along the lines and then on to the

adjoining tracks. Within twenty minutes we had accomplished our arduous task and succeeded in coupling our carriage to the tail-end of the train destined for the capital. The locomotive was belching more cinder and steam, preparing to move out from the station.

Back at the border post, at a distance of about one kilometre, we noticed our two guards talking to three field gendarmes and wildly gesticulating in our direction. The engineer of the train sounded his steam whistle and the locomotive jerked and pulled ever so slowly on the long line of wagons. We heard our two guards yelling to wait for them and then saw the gendarmes, the rooster plumes of their shakos fluttering wildly in the breeze, while they tried to stop the train and fired volleys at our wagon.

The train's engineer did not heed their warning. He fired up the locomotive which pulled the transport and with ever increasing speed, left the rail yard. The righteous gendarmes, who had wanted us in their hands, were utterly distraught in their frustration and flung their rifles to the ground.

Sergeant Gajdos and Lance Corporal Sebes assured us of their continued comradeship and promised to stick it out with us until the end. They thought that their good deed of late might get them off the hook once the allies had won the war.

The train stopped for a few minutes at the town of Pápa. This used to be the home of my maternal grandparents. I would have liked to meet and bring them some food rations. I asked a train attendant, "Are there any Jews remaining around here or have they all been deported?" "Yes," he answered with a chuckle, "they're all gone. Now, we're sitting in their houses." And with a self satisfied grin he added,

"they left a lot of things behind. Anyway, they didn't come by them the honest way." There was no point in setting out to find my relatives.

In the early morning hours we stopped in Esztergom, the birthplace of St. Stephen who was the first King of Hungary from 969 to 1038. Lance Corporal Sebes, being a religious fellow, wanted to visit the beautiful cathedral. He asked me to come along. To his great chagrin, we had arrived too late for morning mass. His disappointment was however greatly alleviated when to our great amazement, we saw the saffron-regaled archbishop, or was it a cardinal, of the arch-primacy of Hungary. Deferentially, we stepped out of his way and from street level saluted His Eminence. Graciously and with a benign smile he bestowed upon both of us, the blessing of the cross.

Early in the afternoon we were approaching the outskirts of Budapest. Regész decided to part company with us and seek shelter at his gentile fiancée's nearby cottage. We had some misgivings about his idea, believing that on his own he would have little chance of evading discovery. We bid him farewell and good luck. We learnt after our liberation that he had been denounced by a neighbour, captured, murdered, hung by his heels.

Our train was slowly rolling into a suburb of the capital. A pedestrian overpass was bridging the rail lines. Some of our fellows peered out through the wagon door intent on seeing a commotion on the span. A small gathering of Arrowcross louts, pointing their rifles at our carriage and hurling epithets at our fellows, shouted venomously, "Hey, there are some more Jews down in those wagons. Let's pull them out and throw them into the Danube with bullets in their rotten skulls."

We jerked our Jewish-looking comrades away from the gates and I, together with Sergeant Gajdos and Lance Corporal Sebes, berated the scum. "Who do you call Jews, you dirty, snivelling, mother frigging rats? Do you think that your arm bands give you the right to insult brave veterans?" Sergeant Gajdos' righteous indignation was sincere for they had continued calling him, of all people, a Jew. Not until he had put on his army jacket, showing three stars on the collar, thus proving him to be a sergeant. The teenage thugs reluctantly laid off, yet they could not suppress expressing their curiosity. "All right, all right, Mr Sergeant, but it's not our fault that some of your men look like God damn Jews!"

In the evening our train was shunted off to another suburb called Köbánya. The passengers alighted. Our rail car was decoupled from the other wagons and pushed off to a siding. We had no idea who had given the order for this decision and anxiously waited for further developments. A large concern to contend with were our fake papers, issued to mislead the Germans, which were of no use in Hungary. No local command could be expected to acknowledge its validity. Accordingly, we were without identification documents. It became apparent that we could not indefinitely remain in the rail car.

Not far from us, on the other side of the tracks was a small building, which turned out to be a tavern. We noticed that rail yard workers streamed to it frequently. We thought it would be a good idea to reconnoitre there. At noon, together with Sebes, we dropped in on the crowd. Our purpose for the visit was multi-fold. First of all, we had to weave a story to the locals convincing them of a good reason for our presence. Then we wanted to find out whether military police were likely to roam the vicinity. And finally, the most important aspect of our visit was to investigate the likelihood of finding refuge with civilians in the neighbourhood.

We were amicably received by the lunch hour crowd and the inn-keeper. To our amazement they professed, without fear, of their dislike for the Arrowcross bandits and a strong preference for members of the regular army, like ourselves.

We consumed a good tasting potato soup and were offered a free bottle of wine by the tavern owner. During our talk with the workers, we were informed that field gendarmes had not been around these parts and that the civilians, mostly families of union men, were eagerly awaiting their liberation by the Soviets. All this was welcome news. Our comrades decided to send out a scout party trying to find accommodation in the vicinity. Food to be offered to prospective hosts would certainly serve as an enticement.

Sebes objected to our plans, professing that strangers cannot be trusted. He would rather try to make contact with his family in Kispest, another suburb of the capital, in order to obtain civilian clothes and false identification papers. He was convinced that he could provide Gajdos with the same necessities. Our two guards decided to give this attempt two days. In the meantime they counselled us to stay put.

Twenty-Eight

A group of Levente-s, paramilitary youths, belonging to an organization established by the former Horthy regime, were working on rail tracks adjacent to our box car. Two youths, beckoned by Lance Corporal Sebes came over to us. One of them showed readiness to search for his relatives. The other youth promised to find my mother in the Dr Semmelweis street, which was in the Theresetown district of his family. Both boys showed considerable enthusiasm when they were offered tobacco and sugar accompanied by the promise of more to come, should their quest prove successful.

In the morning of the third day, one of the Levente's returned with the unwelcome news that the search for Sebes's family had been futile. In the afternoon, the second had arrived and in rushing over to me gave me the happy report that my mother was waiting across the tracks, next to a tramway stop. I scurried across a narrow trestle bridge and then saw her nervously pacing up and down on the sidewalk. We tried to act inconspicuously, not wanting to draw attention to ourselves, yet our sudden encounter did not lack the intensity of our feelings.

My mother had not received news from me for over one year and had lived with the gnawing assumption that I had also been deported to a concentration camp. In regards to her, I could not have known whether she had survived the constant roundups taking place in the capital. As we could not linger around the sidewalk for long, it was decided that we would continue our conversation in the tavern, across the railway tracks.

We sat down at a table close to a window, ordered the well-known potato soup of the house and started to recount, in hushed tones, our mutual experiences. My mother had been furnished by the presbytery of the Theresetown district with a forged birth certificate, attesting to her being the offspring of rural, Protestant parents. The minister however, being a conscientious parson, took the conversion of my mother seriously and would issue the priceless documents only after she had memorized all the important prayers, psalms and rituals of the church. In spite of new identity papers in her possession, which had been corroborated by compliant city hall officials, my mother acted jittery in the presence of Arrowcross people walking in and out of the tavern. It took me quite awhile to calm her down.

We had a lengthy chat during which we tried to reassure each other and searched for words expressing our hope for the future. "Son," my mother said while tenderly caressing my hands, "you'll see that everything will turn out fine. Soon we'll be free again. The Soviets will rid us of the fascist plague and in the years to come we will look back at these nightmarish years hardly believing that all these miseries could really have happened."

"Mother, do you sincerely believe that one can have faith that such suffering will never happen again?" I interjected. "After the lack of proof that there is divine benevolence in the death of millions of children and the suffering of innocent people?" "We cannot fathom the designs of God. It is beyond our grasp to comprehend," she said. "But if it is beyond our comprehension," I objected, "Then only blind and dumb faith remains. We humans can understand things within the range of our intelligence. We see the senseless murder and torture of masses of people. Can there be any heavenly redemption in all this? Could this celestial power and intelligence find no other means to rectify the bad in the world but by

imposing even more suffering?" I had to be blunt as I felt very strong about the injustices we all had been witness to. "If there is divine justice in all the suffering, then I, for one, don't want to agree with such incomprehensible sage designs of the Creator!" "Don't blaspheme God," my mother admonished. "We have to submit to His will and if we want to face the future with strength then we must have faith in Him. This is our only hope."

I still could not accept her reasoning and continued to express my views. "If He has created everything why could He not have controlled the evil in man? Or is man beyond the control of God? Could God be influenced by the prayers of believer? Isn't it He who controls the thoughts and deeds of man?" I knew that my views would not shake the dearly held beliefs of my mother, yet I was not ready to compromise my convictions.

A middle-aged fellow, wearing an Arrowcross insignia and shouldering a rifle, passed by our table. "Can I offer you both a drink, brother?" Brother, being their usual salutation. "Not right now," I replied, "perhaps later. The lady and I have much to talk about. Perhaps I'll join you after," I said, just to get rid of him. The chap, however, could not resist bragging a bit. "You would have enjoyed being with us just an hour ago. We caught some Jews who were hiding out in a flat. I shot one of them," he said smugly. "Well, I don't know if I would've liked that," I said, "I'm more used to frontline situations." He walked over to his buddies's table, leaving us with the fascist greeting of "*Bátorság*" (courage). My mother was flabbergasted by my *sang froid*, however, gained more reassurance by seeing how easily I had played my role. We continued our exchange of ideas.

My mother had not been swayed by my remonstrations. Seeing that I had become

flustered by our discourse, she now tried to calm me down. "Son," she said in a soothing voice, "I'll have to tell you the same thing again, we cannot understand the Creator's plans. We have to believe that His deeds are for the good of humanity." "How can you say this after all we have seen and experienced?" I objected, "Are you really that naive?" I wanted to know in a rather blunt manner. "Aren't we just pawns in the hands of Creation which, or who, enjoys seeing the monstrous antics of Man?"

My mother paused for a moment and then said, "I've been thinking about this for a long time. Perhaps the death and suffering of millions will serve as a lesson to man to mend his ways?" "And how do you think such changes in behaviour could really come about?" I enquired in a somewhat sceptical manner. "By more education," she said. "Then people would be in a stronger position to resist the wiles of demagogues and crazy, power hungry politicians who would not have shirked from waging war, sacrificing the lives of dumb millions."

I had to agree with my mother on this point. She warmed up to her ideas. "Real hope for humanity, in avoiding further strife and conflagrations is in better education. The power of educated and intelligent masses would preclude the necessity of war. Problems could be solved through reasoned discussion and negotiations." Seeing that I was nodding in agreement, my mother now declared convincingly, "And in this, lies the real hope for the future."

We has spent more than one hour in animated conversation. It was time to part. During our return to the tram stop, my mother tried to persuade me to move in with her to the small, bombed-out flat she had been in for months. However it would have been unwise to risk our lives in such a manner, for the city was swarming with

gendarmes and stool-pigeons looking for deserters and Jews. I promised to see her again as soon as the situation had cleared up a bit.

It was Christmas Eve when rail workers came over to our box car with the news that all wagons were to be rerouted and placed under German control. Our hiding place had become untenable. When we asked the workers about the cause for the sudden order, they replied, "Well, don't you know, the Russians have surrounded the capital and their tanks have breached the defences of Buda." We had witnessed heavy artillery fire and bomber attacks for one week, however, we could not have known of the advances the Russians had made. Only later did we find out that a provisional Hungarian government under General Dálnoki had been established in the Soviet occupied territories.

The small group of Levente-s, who were not willing to partake in the fighting around the capital, had scouted the neighbourhood for shelter. They told us of a house nearby, where the owner, a young widow was ready, in exchange for victuals, to let us hide in her backyard air-raid bunker.

At dusk, Gajdos, Sebes and fifteen of our KMSZ labourer group had furtively moved into the shelter. We descended through two iron trap doors and into a dimly lit thirty metre long, dank, concave cement vault.

The foul, stifling odours within were hardly relieved by whiffs of fresh air filtering in through the narrow ventilation pipes. Seated on benches, which were placed in the aisles flush against the ice cold walls, were a motley group of civilians who viewed us, the intruders, with barely concealed misgivings. Shivering in the unheated,

crypt-like enclosure, the haggard, pale and famished people eagerly reached for canned food which our guards distributed among them. Thus we had established a better rapport.

The first night in the bunker was spent without sleep while a constant cavalcade of diarrhea afflicted persons stumbling over the feet of stiff jointed grumblers sought relief in the courtyard's out-house. The booming reverberations of the Red Army's heavy artillery smiting historic parts of Buda to smithereens, were precursors of our forthcoming liberation.

In the morning I ventured out into the backyard, with the intent of washing up a bit. For days we did not have enough water to clean up. It was a bright, cold day, the vapours of my breath freezing on my lips. I found a hatchet with which I chopped chunks of ice for cleansing. I stripped to the waist and while vigorously rubbing myself down with shards of ice and snow, two low flying Russian Rata fighters overhead, strafing nearby targets. I was so elated in seeing them that I could not resist waving my shirt in their direction. Whether or not they had seen me remained unknown, suffice to say as they swung low overhead, they ceased to riddle our immediate neighbourhood.

It must have been around ten in the evening when the burst of machine guns, mortars detonating, explosions of hand grenades, the swish of *Katyushas*, the mobile multiple Soviet rocket launchers, ricocheted in our direct vicinity. A half hour later, small fire arms clattered against our bunker's iron doors, the bolts barring entrance shattered and two soot-faced Soviet soldiers vaulted down the steps.

Everyone one was ordered out. No one budged, apparently not understanding the Russian command. Annoyed, anger and disdain distorting their features the soldiers pulled back the pins of hand grenades, ready to throw them into our midst. At that very moment, one of our comrades, a fellow from the Carpatho-Ukraine, who had just been dozing in the far end of the bunker, awoke from the commotion and hollered in Russian, "Hold it, we're all comrades here, we're Jews and Communists."

The soldiers stopped and relented for a moment then pushed everyone outside into the courtyard. They lobbed their hand grenades into the bunker, igniting the contents of the shelter in an all consuming firebrand.

The civilians, mostly elderly people, some men and a few children were let go. The Leventes, our staff and our group were prodded by rifle butts into the street. A small hand-held mirror, which I had treasured for months, was the only thing I could think of to offer to one of the Soviet liberators. He looked at his image briefly and then disgustedly, as if he could not recognize himself, threw the mirror against a brick wall.

On the streets, fighting was still in progress. Trace flares lit up the night sky of the town. Buildings were in ruins. Soviet tanks, motorized vehicles and flatbed trucks were everywhere. Soldiers pursued Hungarian and German rear guards putting up stiff resistance in crumbling edifices. Shrapnel in density, not unlike a swarm of locusts intent on destroying everything in sight, were landing on streets and houses. As we were lined up to be marched off, an attractive female Soviet military police officer was directing traffic, waving in her hands two small flags with snappy motions. At that very moment a splinter of a shrapnel jagged her right hand. With a dispassionate and scornful smile she held up her blood soaked hand looked at the

stumps of three fingers blown away, balled her left hand into a fist and shouted triumphantly, "Stalin! Stalin!" Then with a haughty and indifferent expression she wrapped swatches of one of her torn flags to stanch the flow of blood around her injured hand and continued with a hearty laugh to direct military traffic.

At that time, unknown to us, Pest with a population of 800,000 and defended by five German and four Hungarian divisions was completely encircled by the Red Army. In mid-January, 1945, eight city boroughs were overrun by the Soviet and Rumanian armies. The Russians had abstained from carpet-bombing the western part of the capital and limited their attacks to artillery barrages, thus sparing the vital waterworks installations.

Eichmann, the notorious SS officer, entrusted by Reichsführer Himmler to carry out the deportation of Jews to death camps, had fled the capital before Christmas, 1944, ahead of the advancing Soviets. His last instructions called for five hundred German soldiers and two hundred Hungarian police to bomb the Budapest ghetto, together with its 70,000 inhabitants.

Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat and humanitarian who had unflinchingly risked his life on many occasions to save Jews, tried to prevent this tragedy. He approached SS General Schmidhuber, commander of Pest with the urgent demand to rescind this devilish order. Otherwise, he convinced the general that a postwar allied war crimes tribunal would most certainly sentence him to be hanged. The general, sufficiently impressed, promised to cancel Eichmann's order, however, could not vouch for the Hungarian police to obey.

On 17 January, 1945, Pest had been liberated by the Red Army. The stubborn defenders of the capital fled across the Danube into the hills of Buda from where they decided to make a last, tenacious stand against the Reds. The narrow streets, cliffs and forests of the ancient capital favoured the German and Hungarian forces. The Germans bombed the Danube bridges, thus hampering the advance of the Soviets. Marshal Tolbukhin's attack on Buda was thwarted by indomitable resistance and thrown back. In the meantime, Hungarian parachutists, loyal to truce-seeking Regent Horthy, barricaded themselves in the Citadel section of Buda, and launched a fierce assault against the Germans.

For the better part of one month, Buda was under Red Army siege, entrapping 70,000 German and Hungarian army units. Marshal Malinovsky, joining forces with Tolbukhin finally succeeded in occupying Buda on 13 February, capturing 65,000 resolute enemy soldiers. The German high command had miscalculated by leaving eleven divisions around Budapest, who were either annihilated or put to flight. In order to lend assistance to these forces, SS Oberstgruppenführer Sepp Dietrich, a distinguished strategist and indomitable commander, threw his Sixth Panzer Division into the fray. They succeeded to stem the Russian advance toward the western part of Hungary and threatened, during a few short weeks, to destroy a number of Soviet divisions.

After our liberation, we received more news about our comrade Vajda, the horse trainer. After having served a time with the SS and later with the Wehrmacht, he managed to cross battle lines and joined the Red Army. He took part in the siege of Buda where he distinguished himself by destroying several German machine gun positions. His method of operation had been unique. Strapping a cluster of hand

grenades around his waist, he would fling them with abandon at the enemy nests, then, with a dagger clenched between his teeth, he would finish off the surviving Nazis.

Our Russian-speaking comrades asked a Soviet officer to let us join their army. He refused with the remark that he did not need any raw recruits. The only ones among us, he was willing to accept were the ones who could serve as interpreters. Then he remarked, "You four from the Carpatho-Ukraine, we'll give you Red Army uniforms. If you know how to handle a rifle and are not afraid to kill Nazis, we'll take you." When we asked him again to be accepted into his unit, he said, "I won't. Try finding another commander. Good luck."

It was around midnight. A few thousand German and Hungarian army prisoners were herded together into marching formations. We were told that a two hundred kilometre south eastern trek had been ordered. The night was starless, yet a pale, full moon shed eerie light onto the trackless, frozen wasteland.

Russian soldiers were raking the ground in front of us with machine gun fire. Innumerable explosions followed. The Soviets were clearing the path through mine fields. In ditches were the naked bodies of murdered SS and Hungarian soldiers. Their jackets and shirts had been ripped off and long knives were embedded in their bellies.

A Hungarian soldier, who understood some Russian, explained that it was the *Commies* way of paying back for the treachery committed against Soviet officers. They, carrying white truce flags, were promised free passage by the fascists. As

soon as they had approached the enemy lines they were riddled by automatic rifle fire. "These rats," one Soviet officer, pointing at the disembowelled enemies in the trenches, shouted, "don't deserve bullets. Even knives in their bellies are too good for them!"

We marched throughout the night without being afforded either food, drink nor given respite. Some of the soldiers had fainting spells and dropped down between the marching columns. The Russians clobbered them with their rifles. Prisoners pulled up their comrades and dragged them along the route. Some Hungarian soldiers wrapped their army overcoats around the shoulders of their former German allies, trying to disguise and protect them from the unbridled venom of the guards. They were not in a forgiving mood.

Our two former slave guards felt exhausted at the end of their resistance. They asked us to carry their side bags. "Fellows," they said, "have heart. We are not used to such treatment. You can handle it better than we. We have given you plenty of occasions in the past to carry heavy loads without food and drink." They did not realize the paradox meaning of their comments.

At dawn, we marched through a small village. Old peasant folk were throwing slices of bread into our stumbling lines. Our valiant guards, Hungarian and German soldiers, fought like rabid dogs for morsels of food which they frenetically tore from the hands of their comrades. It gave us strength and satisfaction to not vie for food while our former adversaries cringed from weakness.

During the day a severe blizzard stowed blinding snow onto our trail. The Russians considered us as enemies not deserving of pity. At dusk, after having marched for

sixteen hours, we were given a thirty minute rest. Everyone received a few tiny clumps of dark, frozen bread which was too hard to chew. I put the small ration inside my pocket hoping that after a few hours, body heat would sufficiently thaw it out.

We were prodded on to resume our labourious march. I felt near the end of my strength. Lack of sleep, food and drink, the unforgiving, seemingly infinite march had sapped my energy. Yet, so close to ultimate freedom, a conviction of survival I never abandoned, would not allow me to falter.

A Soviet soldier, a Kalmuck in his early sixties, surveying our sorrowful procession, could not help but make fun of us. In sign language he let us know that he, an old man, was much hardier than any of his prisoners. He slapped his barrel chest proudly and motioned to watch him. A sub-machine gun strapped around his back and holding a tattered, open umbrella over his head, he started to swagger in parade steps for one hour along our miserable rows. Every so often, he would guffaw loudly and spit out contemptuously in the direction of his prisoners.

Again we had marched through the second night. In the morning we came to a halt in the main square of the small town of Kecskemét. Soviet officers walked around our lines and designated all healthy individuals to be marched off to the railway station. A female captain, a medical officer, with conspicuously Jewish features, approached our group. One of our comrades, who had a smattering of Slavic languages told her that we were *Ivrei*, meaning Jews. She ordered us to step out of the lines and after exchanging a few hurried words with a higher rank officer, advised us that we were free to go our way.

Feeling the chains of imprisonment peeling off of our souls, we burst out into spontaneous laughter, hugged each other and hailed the Soviet Army. Never was I to forget my liberation and the gratitude I felt toward the Red soldiers.

Twenty-Nine

We were looking for night time shelter. A bombed out former Jewish community hall was nearby. Doors and windows were missing, gaping holes in the walls caused by mortar-fire provided ice cold air circulation inside the building. Our comrade, the one with Slavic language skills, had overheard a conversation between Soviet officers and rushed in to inform us that, "Fellows, we're really a lucky bunch. If that female medical doctor hadn't shown up, we would be with German and Hungarian soldiers on our way to a Siberian prisoner of war camp."

Our dwelling was rather drafty. The ceiling was fissured by fragmentation shelling through which melting snow dripped upon our heads during the night. Wooden floors showed gaping breaches where planking had been ripped out for firewood.

Our group of former slave labourers were huddling in one corner of the hall with a solid surface where a steady fire, stoked by library books and boards of a decapitated, grieving pianoforte provided a modicum of homely comfort.

A new acquaintance, a former KMSZ in his forties, whom we had perceived the first time through the cracks in the flooring, invited us for a rest at his home, in the south of Hungary. We readily agreed and thought nothing of trekking one hundred kilometres to his place in the city of Szeged. In the morning we gathered our meagre possessions, blanket, side bag, mess kit and hoped to arrive at our destination without hindrance.

On the main square we were witness to a gung-ho brawl between close to fifty Soviet enlisted men and their officers. They were all stone-drunk, still gulping vodka from bottles and tin cans which most certainly contained something more forceful than water. The men were alternately clubbing each other, or shooting at their bucking opponent's feet, but all done with good cheers, merrily and general hilarity.

During our trek, we stayed at villager's cottages, where we were given free board and meals. Three days later, we arrived at our new friends' cottage which he found in good repair. After we had initially soaked ourselves in a bathtub full of warm water, we were treated to a succulent beef stew, prepared by a newly hired peasant girl.

I spent a restful night in a down, duvet bed and woke up early to savour my first full day of comfort and freedom. I dressed in a leisurely manner and after having enjoyed a hearty breakfast, intended to stroll around the neighbourhood for awhile. On an impulse I tapped my open shirt pocket where I had kept the amulet, blessed by the Pope, for almost two years. The charm which as predicted, would keep me out of harm's way, was now gone.

I looked for it throughout my room and the entire house. I asked my comrades to help me find it all to no avail. As if by divine preordination, once the time of my thralldom had passed, the amulet, so it seemed, had fulfilled its purpose.

A few days later I was ready, together with a young couple, the fellow spoke Ukrainian and an older comrade, a former pay master in the service of the state railway, to return to Budapest. As a precaution, not to be intercepted by the Soviet military and to obtain additional cooperation from recalcitrant villagers, we were wearing Cossack style fur lined casques, prepared for us by our generous host, a furrier by trade.

In the evening of our first day, we stopped over at the cottage of a small hamlet's station master. He welcomed our friend, whom he recognized as a formerly well-placed railway functionary, with solicitous respect. We could not escape the suspicion that the station master was intent to make up for some compromising activities during the fascist regimes. We were served a fine dinner and allowed to sleep in the couple's bedroom. His pretty and pleasingly plump daughter, a woman in her thirties, prepared bath water in a large cauldron and to our great amazement, but not to the least embarrassment of her parents invited our friend, the former pay master to share a warm ablution and massage with her.

The next day we continued our long march in a heavy snowfall, chilly temperatures and whipping windstorm. A few Soviet convoys who passed by us wanted to know who we actually were. They took us for Russian civilians thanks to our Cossack fur hats, or some kind of political agitators. Our Ukrainian-speaking comrade came up with the readily accepted answer, that yes, we were organizing Communist cells on our way to the capital. This pat explanation served us well all along the route.

On one occasion we met a pillaging, young Soviet soldier. He looked like a primitive good natured peasant boy with a ruddy, round face. He told our friend that he had been quite successful in stealing valuables from peasant's homes. Just to prove his

point, he pulled back the sleeves of his jacket and showed, attached to both his wrists and lower arms, wrist and pocket watches, plus his prize possession, an alarm clock which he let ring repeatedly. After marching along with us to the next village, he started casting covetous glances at our comrade's girlfriend. He tried to entice her in having sex with him by offering to give her his alarm clock. It was only after protestations by our friend, claiming that she was his wife, and furthermore that they were not in need of a clock, that he desisted.

By now, we had arrived at the outskirts of the village. A dark skinned, cherry faced, buxom peasant woman in her late fifties, pushing a small cart of fire wood, was waddling by us on the other side of the road. The soldier cast an evaluating glance at her and then told my companion, "You can keep your wife for yourself. I'll try my luck with that chubby thing over there. Older women love me more, anyway. You'll see!" And with that he bolted after her. She screamed and squeaked in pretended horror, pushed the cart in front of the soldier who, in his aroused desire, tripped over the wooden two wheeler. Thus, the little, plump one gained a small advantage, darted and hopped in quick, hen-like steps into a hay barn. The *Russky*, as they were known to be called, stormed after her into the hay loft. A few minutes later we could hear the satisfied grunts of the soldier boy and the matron's cackling squeals of delight.

In the evening, we had arrived at another settlement and knocked at the door of a well-maintained cottage. A young woman opened the door and after having listened to our request to spend the night in her home, let us in. She confided to us that her husband had been declared missing on the Russian front. Two Russian soldiers had barged into her home the previous night with the intention of raping her. She had

staved off their attack by claiming that her husband was on his way home. Since then she was terrified by the thought of the Russians returning. In the village she had been searching for a man to assume the role of her husband. Although she was a pretty woman, no man was ready to challenge the horny Russians. It was for these reasons that she was only too glad to have us around and promoted our older friend to become her alleged mate. This night, fortunately, the soldiers did not return.

In the morning she asked *her hubby* to repair a double barrelled lock on the front door. He was quite handy and installed the mechanism to her satisfaction. As we were about to leave her house she asked our friend to stay inside, while she was to test the lock from the outside. Apparently, there was something wrong with the plug and tumblers. She could not get in and he could not get out. Rollicking laughter parted from her lips as she shouted triumphantly to our friend, "I know how to get in, but you can't get out. Now, you can't get away from me!" We thought that this was a good joke, however the woman was indeed hoping for him to stay, especially as she thought him to be a good catch for a secure future. Our friend was only let go when he promised to return for her after he had found a new job with the state railway.

We had arrived at the outskirts of Budapest in the morning. Most of the buildings were in shambles. The streets were littered with debris from house to house fighting. Overturned tramway carriages, wrecked automobiles, broken furniture, useless store equipment, bricks, transoms and the surmounting of barricade remnants hampered our worrisome progression.

People clad in ragged clothing and with drawn faces, scurried by in search of food. The frozen carcass of a horse, still strapped in its harness, was lying near a curb. A slew of hungry people, mostly housewives, some with pen knives, forks or only spoons, were hacking away at the flesh of the draft animal. Our premonitions and fear of not finding family members alive were reinforced.

We stopped at our young friend's parental home. A few moments later he had returned, grief-stricken with the horrendous news that his kin had been drowned in the Danube by a gang of roving Arrowcross thugs.

Next, we halted at our older comrade's apartment where he had lived with his sister and brother-in-law. With great apprehension he climbed the stairs. Again, after a few minutes, we learnt of more calamitous happenings. Ashen-faced, my comrade recounted, his voice breaking, that his relatives had been thrown, through the windows of their upper floor flat into the street by Arrowcross assassins. Their broken bodies, still squirming in mortal agony, were then dropped in front of speeding tramways.

I continued a solitary search for my mother with grave forebodings. On the way I passed by the main synagogue of Budapest on Dohány street. In its courtyard, facing the street, I saw, what looked from a distance like a symmetrically arranged, large pile of naked white store window mannequins. Approaching the display, not understanding the relevance of waxen, human like fashion marionettes in a place of worship, I was dumbstruck by the realization that yes, these figures did have a relevance with the synagogue. They were the thousands of emaciated corpses of Jewish women, old men, children and infants, their contorted features showing in their rigor mortis the agonies of torture. Their cadavers had been stacked high like

heaps of cord wood readied to become funeral pyres. The Soviets, who had gained knowledge of the fascist's intention to exterminate the ghetto had, in spite of a determined onslaught to prevent the massacre, come too late to save the victims.

I had arrived in front of the house where my mother had found refuge. The superintendent opened the heavy, wooden door of the building. At first blush, he refused to let me in. However, when he caught a glimpse of my Cossack headgear, his face took on a sickly pallor and no longer barred the entrance. Possibly having a guilty conscience, he believed me to be a Communist appointee.

I found my mother alive. Our joy at seeing each other again, was boundless. I found out that she had spent the last weeks in great pain, recuperating from a Soviet aerial attack which, destroying half of the building, had catapulted her heavily against the bedroom wall. Disregarding her affliction, she hobbled over to the kitchen and busied herself with a light meal, prepared over an open hearth.

The tenants of the building had been fortunate in having, as one of their neighbours, a former grocer who, in anticipation of a lengthy siege of the capital, had laid in a sizable store of edibles. Bartering food for clothing, jewellery and other valuables, he had carried out a brisk exchange trade with the other dwellers.

We discussed our plans for the future. My mother was not concerned about her personal safety. "You see, son," she said tenderly, "it is not myself that I'm worrying about. It is you. You have no future in this country. You are young, go and find a stable, free and democratic country to live in."

When I expressed my anxiety about leaving her behind, she tried to reassure me, "Don't fret about me, I'll manage somehow. I hope to find some distant relatives in the country side, or God willing, some of my brothers, sisters, or even my parents will come back from the war. Besides, if nothing pans out, I'll be able to find a job in a factory as an experienced leather worker."

Seeing that these firmly expressed views did little to assuage my fears for her she continued trying to convince me. "Go, son," she insisted, "get out of this country. You're the only one for whom I would willingly sacrifice my life, but leave. Don't stay with me. The Nazis might come back." As hard as she tried I could not persuade her to leave. Noticing my reluctance and stubbornness, she resorted to female wiles. Tears streamed down her face and wringing her hands, she lamented, "Would you rather have me limping along with you on dirt roads to reach a safe haven, somewhere else? Could you imagine that I could survive such a calvary in my present condition?" "No, son," she added, stroking my face, "let me recover here first and then, in a few months perhaps, when you are settled in another country were the war is no longer raging, I'll follow you."

As much as I tried I could not change her firm beliefs and decisions which were only guided by affection for me. Little did we foresee that it would take a few years until we were once again united.

The next morning, my mother had prepared a rucksack for me stuffed full with fresh linen and some edibles. She limped down four flights from her flat accompanying me to the front of the building and, while holding back her tears, waved after me with her cane until I had turned a corner in the street.

In a last effort of concern for me she had traded in her golden necklace for a pair of new, hobnailed shoes, which being three sizes too large, were hard to scamper in toward a distant land of hope.

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